NATION

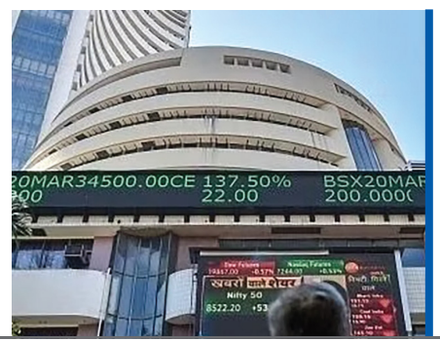
Rescuers race against time to save 8 in T'gana tunnel

≫ Page: 4 ≪

BUSINESS

Mcap of eight of top-10 firms fall ₹1.65 lakh crore

≫ Page: 7 ≪



SPORTS

India pacer Jasprit Bumrah receives his ICC awards for 2024

≫ Page: 8 ≪

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Border row between K'taka and M'rashtra halts buses

Sena (UBT) workers blacken K'taka buses, tie saffron flags

BELAGAVI, 23 FEB

Bus services between Karnataka and Maharashtra have been affected due to attack on bus drivers from both sides amid the sudden flare- over border row in Belagavi. The protests, which have flared up over the past two days, have centred on the language issue between the two states.

The dispute resurfaced on Friday when a bus driver and conductor were attacked for allegedly not speaking in Marathi at Marihal in Belagavi. In retaliation, a Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC) bus driver, Bhaskar Jadhav, was assaulted and had his bus blackened on Saturday in Guyilal, Hiriyur Taluk, Chitradurga district.

Rajesh Potdar, Divisional Controller of the North West Karnataka Road Transport Corporation (NWKSRTC), explained that to avoid inconvenience, buses have continued to operate up to the state border, where passengers can transfer to Maharashtra state buses. Potdar confirmed that the Belagavi division typically operates around 120 buses daily to Maharashtra, serving routes from Nippani, Chikkodi, and Athani. However, these services were suspended from Saturday afternoon amid the escalating tension.

Shiv Sena (UBT) workers protest by blackening buses bearing Karnataka number plates in Pune on Sunday **PHOTO: PTI**

On Saturday, protests intensified as the Shiv Sena (UBT) faction in Maharashtra tied saffron flags to Karnataka state buses at bus stands in Kolhapur and Nandik, while chanting anti-Karnataka slogans. In retaliation, Karnataka Rakshana Vedike (KRV) activists blackened a Maharashtra state bus and tied a Kannada flag to a bus at the Athani border.

The situation took a further turn on Sunday when a Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) ultra-luxury bus was vandalised with slogans such as 'Jai Maharashtra', 'Marathi', and 'Maharashtra Navnirman Sena' sprayed in black paint.

Amid the unrest, police arrested a fifth individual in connection with the assault on Karnataka bus conductor Mahadevappa Mahadev Hukkeri. Hukkeri had been attacked by a group of 7-8 people at Balekundri village in Belagavi taluk. Five suspects were arrested, including a minor, who was sent to a juvenile centre in Belagavi.

According to Hukkeri's police complaint, the incident began when a girl asked for a bus ticket in Marathi. When he asked her to speak in Kannada, she and her male companion attacked him. However, the conductor was also booked for 'indecent behaviour' with the minor, based on the girl's complaint, which has further fuelled tensions.

Currently recovering in the Belagavi Institute of Medical Sciences (BIMS), Hukkeri denied the accusations against him under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, describing them as false. "If I am guilty, let me hang to death. I believe the truth will prevail," he stated. His supporters held a protest at the Marihal police station on Saturday, demanding that the charges be dropped. KRV District President Deepak Gudaganatti argued that the overcrowded bus made it impossible for Hukkeri to harass the girl.

Pro-Maharashtrian group Maharashtra Ekikaran Samiti (MES) has also shown support for the accused.

Kannada organisations, have expressed frustration with the lack of response from Women and Child Development Minister Laxmi Hebbalkar and district in-charge Minister Satish Jarkiholi. *—Salar News*

>>>More on Page 2

COSTING $750 MILLION

Govt: USAID funded 7 projects in India, no link to voter turnout

NEW DELHI, 23 FEB

The Finance Ministry's annual report for 2023-24 has revealed that the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is funding seven projects in India, with a total budget of approximately USD 750 million. Of this, USD 97 million (around Rs 825 crore) has been obligated for the current financial year, focusing on sectors such as agriculture, food security, water, sanitation, renewable energy, disaster management, health, and climate adaptation.

Notably, the report also clarifies that no funds have been allocated to increase voter turnout, despite recent political controversy. The funds are part of USAID's long-standing bilateral development assistance to India, which began in 1951, totalling over USD 17 billion for more than 555 projects.

The political row erupted earlier this month when it was claimed that USAID had cancelled a USD 21 million grant aimed at boosting voter turnout in India.

However, it was later revealed that the grant was actually intended for Bangladesh, not India. This led to accusations from the Congress party, which accused the BJP of spreading "fake news" and demanded answers from Prime Minister Narendra Modi and **External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar**.

PHOTO:PTI

- Asked Notably, the report also clarifies that no funds have been allocated to increase voter turnout, despite recent political controversy.

Jaishankar expressed concern over the misleading reports, stressing that USAID's activities in India have been carried out in good faith, while the Congress labelled the issue a deliberate misinformation campaign. *—PTI*

Techie found dead inside car, cardiac arrest suspected

BENGALURU, 23 FEB

A 37-year-old IT professional was found dead inside his car near Brookfield, with the HAL police registering a case under the Unnatural Death Report (UDR). The incident, which occurred on Thursday, came to light following a detailed investigation. According to police reports shared with Salar News, the deceased, Santosh Prasad—a resident of Indiranagar and an employee at a private firm in Bengaluru—was on his way to work when he reportedly experienced chest pain while stuck in traffic. *—Salar News*

>>>More on Page 2

Preliminary inquiry not must: SC in Lokayukta case

NEW DELHI, 23 FEB

The Supreme Court has said conducting a preliminary inquiry is not mandatory for registering a case under the Prevention of Corruption Act. A bench of Justices Dipankar Datta and Sandeep Mehta said the purpose of a preliminary inquiry is not to verify the veracity of the information received, but merely to ascertain whether it revealed the commission of a cognisable offence. The SC delivered its verdict on an appeal by the Karnataka government, challenging a March 2024 judgment of the state high court which quashed an FIR lodged by the Karnataka Lokayukta police against a public servant under the PC Act. The SC said the high court erred in concluding that the FIR could be quashed because of the omission of a preliminary inquiry. *—PTI*

When Modi talks, it's called threat to democracy: Meloni

WASHINGTON, 23 FEB

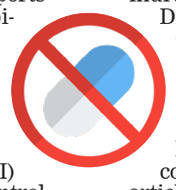
Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni launched a scathing critique of what she describes as a "liberal network," accusing the Left of hypocrisy and of reacting with "hysteria" to the rise of conservative leaders globally. She said when leaders like herself, US President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi collaborate they are called a "threat to democracy" while leftist leaders are praised for similar alliances. Meloni's remarks came as she addressed the Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington. *—PTI*

>>>More on Page 6

India bans 2 drugs behind opioid crisis in Africa

NEW DELHI, 23 FEB

The apex drug regulatory authority has prohibited the production and export of all combinations of pain relief medicines tapentadol and carisoprodol, over news reports that unapproved combinations of the drugs exported to West African countries are driving an opioid crisis there.



Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI) has asked the drug control authorities of states and Union territories to withdraw all export NOCs and permission to manufacture all combinations of the two drugs.

Tapentadol is an opioid medication that is used to treat moderate to severe pain. Carisoprodol is a muscle relaxant which works on the centres in the brain and spinal cord to relieve pain.

Both Tapentadol and Carisoprodol are approved individually by Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) but not approved as a combination in the country. Also, they are not part of NDPS drugs list in India. "This is in connection with a recent article from BBC whereby, it has been written that the combination drug Tapentadol and Carisoprodol has significant abuse potential and this combination is being exported to West African countries from India," DCGI said. *—PTI*

History sheeter hacked to death in Bengaluru

BENGALURU 23 FEB

A 38-year-old rowdy-sheeter, Haider Ali, was chased and brutally hacked to death by a gang near Shanti Nagar in the early hours of Sunday.

Ali, a resident of Anepalya and notorious at the Ashoknagar police station, had a history of 11 criminal cases, including attempted murder and assault. His most recent offence involved violations under the NDPS Act in 2022. He was known for his alleged political connections, having reportedly campaigned for Congress MLA and BDA Chairman NA Haris during the 2023 Assembly elections; his brother is also an active Congress worker.

Haider Ali **PHOTO:SALAR**

The brutal attack occurred around 1.15am as Ali was returning home on a motorbike with a friend after a party near a bar on Residency Road. Their bike was rammed by a car containing the assailants, who then emerged wielding machetes and iron rods. While Ali's friend was injured in an attempt to help, Ali tragically succumbed to his injuries before reaching Bowring Hospital. An autopsy revealed 56 wounds, and his skull had been crushed with an iron rod.

The murder, which transpired despite assurances of enhanced security from Bengaluru Police Commissioner B Dayananda, has ignited widespread concern regarding the city's deteriorating law and order situation.

Following the news of Ali's death, tensions flared outside Bowring Hospital as supporters gathered, some brandishing machetes, prompting police intervention to maintain order. *—Salar News*

Sri Lankan Navy arrests 32 Indian fishermen

COLOMBO, 23 FEB

Sri Lankan authorities on Sunday arrested 32 Indian fishermen and seized 5 fishing boats for allegedly venturing into the territorial waters of the island nation, the Navy said.

The Sri Lankan Navy in a statement said the arrests occurred during a special operation in the sea area north of Mannar.

The Navy continues to conduct regular patrols and operations in Sri Lankan waters to curb illegal fishing practices of foreign fishing boats, taking into account the impact of those practices on the livelihood of local fishermen, the statement said.

The Navy said the arrested fishermen and their boats were brought to the Talaimannar Pier, where they will be handed over to the Fisheries Inspector of Mannar for legal action.

The Navy has so far this year arrested 131 Indian fishermen and held 18 fishing boats for allegedly poaching in Sri Lankan waters, the statement said. *—PTI*

Footpaths are for pedestrians, not motorists

HAMEED ASHRAF
BENGALURU, 17 FEB

In Bengaluru, footpaths, which should serve pedestrians, have become unofficial bypass lanes for motorists, with impatient two-wheeler riders flouting traffic rules. From running red lights to bypassing congestion, these violations have turned walking through the City into a dangerous affair. Bengaluru Traffic Police on 4 February warned that they would cancel the driving licenses of those caught riding on footpaths. Yet, the violations continue. A police official admitted to Salar News that enforcing this rule has become a challenge. "Firstly, we are overburdened with multiple duties. Secondly, when we spot offenders driving on footpaths, they often flee before we can record registration numbers." *—Salar News*

>>>More on Page 2

ON EVE OF 3 YRS OF WAR, RUSSIA LAUNCHES 267 DRONES INTO UKRAINE

KYIV, FEB 23

Russia launched more strike drones into Ukraine overnight on Saturday than in any other single attack of the war, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said on Sunday, one day before the three-year anniversary of Moscow's full-scale invasion.

Writing on social media, Zelenskyy said 267 strike drones had been sent in what he called "the largest attack since Russia began using Iranian-made drones."

Ukraine's air force said 138 drones had been shot down over 13 Ukrainian regions, with 119 more lost en route to their targets. Three ballistic missiles had also been fired, the air force said. One person was killed in a missile strike on the city of Kryvyi Rih, according to the head of the Kryvyi Rih military administration.

The attack came as leaders are seeking to navigate rapid changes in US foreign policy under President Donald Trump, who in a matter of days upended years of support for Ukraine.

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer and French President Emmanuel Macron will make tag-team visits to Washington this week in attempts to persuade Trump not to abandon Ukraine in the peace deal. *—PTI*

SEMIS SPOT SEALED

With Kohli's ton, India beat Pak

DUBAI, 23 FEB

Virat Kohli's sparkling unbeaten century guided India to a commanding six-wicket victory over Pakistan in the Champions Trophy, almost securing them a semifinal spot. The win, which propelled India to the top of Group A with four points, condemned Pakistan to their second successive loss, leaving them on the brink of elimination.

Chasing a challenging target of 242, India's pursuit was anchored by Kohli's 51st ODI ton, his knock of 100 off 111 balls, which included seven boundaries. Shreyas Iyer contributed a solid 56 off 67 balls, and Shubman Gill's 46 helped India reach the target with over seven overs to spare.

Shreyas Iyer celebrates his half century with Virat Kohli **PHOTO: PTI**

Kohli, facing a lean run, overcame challenges from Pakistan's pacers Shaheen Shah Afridi and Haris Rauf, and negotiated the spin of Abrar Ahmed with composure. Pakistan's hopes of troubling him faded as India's top-order flourished. Earlier, Pakistan were restricted to 241, with Saud Shakeel's 62 and Khushdil Shah's 38 providing some resistance. Kuldeep Yadav was the standout bowler, taking 3/40 as India's bowlers maintained tight control throughout the innings. Pakistan's top order faltered early, and despite brief recovery, they were unable to break free. Meanwhile, Kohli completed 14,000 runs in ODI cricket. *—PTI*

>>>More on Page 8

NORAVIRUS OUTBREAK SUSPECTED ON CRUISE SHIP NEAR BELGIUM

BRUSSELS, 23 FEB

A suspected Norovirus outbreak has hit the P&O Iona cruise ship while sailing near Belgium. The exact number of cases onboard is still unclear. Noravirus are a group of viruses known to cause severe vomiting and diarrhea.

According to Sky News, a passenger said, "People were throwing up in restaurants, on decks, outside cabins."

P&O Cruises said fewer than 1 per cent of the passengers were affected but confirmed that "some guests have unfortunately reported symptoms, according to Sky News.

Passengers said that necessary over-the-counter medication, such as gastrointestinal suspension medication or replace salts, were not available on board. Quarantined guests also complained about difficulty in receiving food, fresh towels and clean bed linen, allegedly due to a shortage of staff. P&O Cruise however denied any allegations of medication shortages, saying "Medication is readily available through our onboard medical centre." The ship has the capacity of 5,000 passengers and 1,800 staff. *—Salar News*

- P&O Cruise however denied any allegations of medication shortages.

Border dispute: Ministers urge for peace, unity

Amid the ongoing issues, HK Patil said no one should forget that we are all Indians

BENGALURU, 23 FEB

Karnataka Ministers on Sunday urged citizens to maintain peace in Belagavi as tensions over the border dispute resurfaced.

Amid the ongoing language-related controversy, the state Ministers called on the public to prevent miscreants from escalating tensions in both Karnataka and Maharashtra.

"Kannadigas and Marathis are living harmoniously. Why are you unnecessarily trying to disturb it? I am appealing to the people to stop inciting," Karnataka Law and Parliamentary Affairs Minister HK Patil told reporters. He assured that the government would take all necessary steps to resolve the issue and warned of strict action against those causing disturbances.

- HK Patil assured that the government would take all necessary steps to resolve the issue and warned of strict action against those causing disturbances. The decades old dispute resurfaced on Friday when a bus driver and a conductor were beaten up

State Social Welfare Minister HC Mahadevappa asked people from both sides to remember that they are all fellow Indians, emphasising the importance of unity amidst the border dispute.

Terming the development as "very unfortunate", he said, "We should never forget that we are all Indians."

HK Patil ***PHOTO: X/@HKPATILINC***

He denounced the tendency to rake up the issued which is long settled.

The decades old dispute resurfaced on Friday when a bus driver and a conductor were beaten up for allegedly not speaking in Marathi at Marihal in Belagavi. *—PTI*

Won't tolerate insult to Kannada and Karnataka, says BJP's Vijayendra

BENGALURU, 23 FEB

Amid the ongoing border row, BJP on Sunday condemned any attempts to insult Kannada and the state of Karnataka, calling it an "unpardonable act".

BJP state chief BY Vijayendra said that those who enjoy the benefits of the state but speak against Kannada and Karnataka cannot be forgiven."Insulting Kannada and Karnataka that too within the state is an unpardonable crime. I noticed the statement of Pro-

Prime Minister and Home Minister should call for a meeting with the Chief Minister of Maharashtra and Karnataka to prevent a repeat of incidents like that in Belagavi

-Sanjay Raut, Sena (UBT) leader

Kannada organisations. ," he said. Vijayendra was replying to a question on the

- Vijayendra urged the government to take steps to prevent any conspiracy or mischief aimed at undermining Kannada, Karnataka

attack on a KSRTC bus driver and conductor in Belagavi allegedly for not speaking in Marathi. He urged the state government to take steps to prevent any conspiracy or mischief aimed at undermining Kannada and Karnataka. *—ANI*

CCB rescues two women from flesh trade racket

BENGALURU, 23 FEB

In a significant crackdown on human trafficking, the City Crime Branch (CCB) women protection wing rescued two women from a prostitution ring operating within the Kodigehalli police station limits. Acting on credible intelligence, CCB officials raided a house in the area, where they found the two women locked inside. According to the officers, the victims were lured from different villages across the State with the false promise of high-paying jobs in Bengaluru, only to be forced into the flesh trade. The police have recorded the statements of the rescued women. Based on their complaints, a case has been registered against one woman accused of running the racket. Authorities confirmed that the accused is currently on the run, with efforts underway to trace and arrest her. *—Salar News*

PHOTO: ANI

Two killed in hit and run accident in Hasaan

HASSAN, 23 FEB

Two pilgrims walking to Dharmasthala were tragically run over by a speeding bus here on Sunday. According to police, the incident occurred on National Highway-75 near Heggadihalli in Hassan taluk. The deceased are Suresh, 60, and Kumar, 55, of Anagolu village in Mandya district. Another person who was seriously injured in the accident has been admitted to Hassan district hospital and is receiving treatment. A case of negligent and rash driving was registered against the bus driver who fled the spot after the mishap. *—PTI*

Man sets 4 vehicles afire over unrequited love

BENGALURU, 23 FEB

At least four vehicles were set on fire early Sunday after a youth, angry over rejection by a girl, went on a rampage in Subramanyapura around 1am near Srinidhi Apartment.

Subramanyapura police, with help from locals, quickly put out the fire. The prime suspect, Rahul, a BCom student, allegedly tried to enter the apartment complex with some friends, who are yet to be identified. When a security guard stopped them, Rahul and his friends reportedly assaulted him. In anger, Rahul set a parked car on fire before fleeing, and the flames spread to three nearby vehicles. Locals managed to contain the fire before more damage was done. "We are reviewing CCTV footage and gathering witness statements to identify those involved," an investigating officer said. *—Salar News*

Two students injured in Nagamangala blast

MYSURU, 23 FEB

Two students were injured when a crude explosive detonated at Anjaneya Hill in Kambadahalli village, Nagamangala taluk, on Sunday. The injured, 15-year-old Harayant Patil and Partha, are pupils at Jain Basadi School, where they participated in a cleanliness drive at the local tourist site, approximately one kilometre from their school. The incident occurred as the students were handling a pile of rubbish when the device exploded. One student suffered injuries to his hand, while the other sustained facial injuries; fortunately, both are now reported to be out of danger. They were promptly taken to Adichunchanagiri Hospital. Local police suspect the explosive was left near the garbage by miscreants involved in poaching wild boar. *—Salar News*

MASS MARRIAGE EVENT

Household items and gifts displayed for brides and grooms at a mass marriage ceremony; Couples from various districts gathered at Quddus Saheb Eidgah Maidan, Shivajinagar, in Bengaluru for the ceremony organised by the All India Kerala Muslim Cultural Center and STCH on Sunday ***PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD***

Techie found dead in car after cardiac arrest in City

BENGALURU, 23 FEB

A 37-year-old IT professional was found dead inside his car near Brookfield, with the HAL police registering a case under the Unnatural Death Report (UDR).

The incident, which occurred on Thursday, came to light following a detailed investigation. According to police reports shared with Salar News, the deceased, Santosh Prasad—a resident of Indiranagar and an employee at a private firm in Bengaluru—was on his way to work when he reportedly experienced chest pain while stuck in traffic. "He managed to park his car on the roadside but succumbed to cardiac arrest before he could seek help," police stated.

Passers-by and motorists grew concerned after noticing the car stationary for an unusually long time. Upon being alerted, traffic police arrived at the scene, broke the car window, and found Santosh unresponsive. He was declared dead on the spot.

The HAL police confirmed

The incident has sparked concerns over the rising number of cardiac-related deaths among working professionals in the City ***PHOTO: SALAR***

- Passers-by and motorists grew concerned after noticing the car stationary for a long time.Traffic police broke the car window, and found Santosh unresponsive

that preliminary investigations suggest a heart attack as the cause of death.

Santosh's family later informed authorities that he also had a history of high blood sugar levels. His body was sent for a post-mortem examination before being handed over to his family.

The incident has sparked concerns over the rising number of cardiac-related deaths among working professionals in the city. *—Salar News*

PRO- KANNADA ACTIVISTS PUSH TO KEEP CESCK IN MYSURU

MYSURU, 23 FEB

On Sunday, pro-Kannada activists from the Kannada Kriya Samiti and the Classical Kannada Bhasha Horata Samiti convened with Mysuru-Kodagu MP Yaduveer Krishnadatta Chamaraja Wadiyar to advocate for the retention of the Centre of Excellence for Studies in Classical Kannada (CESCK) in Mysuru.

During the meeting at Wadiyar's office in the CADA premises, the activists emphasised the need for the Centre to be established on 4 acres and 2 guntas of land allocated by the government at Manasagangotri, the post-graduate campus of the University of Mysore. In response, MP Yaduveer pledged to bring the matter to the attention of Union Higher Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, in a bid to prevent the Centre's relocation to Bengaluru.

The matter surrounding the CESCK has resurfaced, raising concerns about its potential move to the state capital. *—Salar News*

DESERTED ROADS

Brigade Road, MG Road, and Church Street wore a deserted look during the India vs Pakistan ODI match in Bengaluru ***PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD***

VIJAYENDRA TO ATTEND MYSURU RIGHT-WING RALLY DESPITE BAN

MYSURU, 23 FEB

BJP State president BY Vijayendra is set to attend the Mysuru Chalo event, organised by right-wing activists to protest the recent Udayagiri stone-pelting incident. Despite the police denying permission for the march, organizers have vowed to proceed with the rally to Udayagiri.

On Sunday, City Police Commissioner Seema Latkar officially denied permission to the Rashtra Suraksha Janandolan Committee rally, from JSS Mahavidyapeetha Circle. Authorities also banned a counter-protest organized by the Gandhinagar Dalit Mahasabha and the District Youth Congress Committee. Police have imposed prohibitory orders around protest sites from midnight on 23 February til midnight on 24 February. *—Salar News*

FINES NOT HELPING

Motorists take over City footpaths, no one cares about pedestrians

HAMEED ASHRAF
BENGALURU, 23 FEB

In Bengaluru, pedestrians can no longer walk on footpaths without the constant fear of being hit by two-wheelers or cars. In January 2025 alone, the Bengaluru Traffic Police (BTP) registered 2,309 cases of footpath riding. In 2024, there were 12,696 such cases, with 9,547 recorded in 2023. Despite repeated warnings, this dangerous trend shows no sign of abating.

The risks of footpath riding extend beyond inconvenience. In 2024, Bengaluru saw over 233 pedestrian fatalities and 800 injuries due to road accidents.

"Many times, I have been honked at from behind while walking on the footpath," Shailendra KS, a resident of Jayanagar told **Salar News**. "When that happens, I deliberately walk in front of the bike blocking its way."

Others, like Rajendra Kumar

In 2024, Bengaluru saw over 233 pedestrian fatalities and 800 injuries due to road accidents ***PHOTO: SALAR***

from Chamarajpet, have resorted to using technology to report violations. "I use the Public Eye app to report violations. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't," he said. "The problem is that offenders are penalised only if they get caught."

A senior traffic officer told **Salar News** that even when violations are recorded, linking registration numbers to current vehicle owners is often challenging due to discrepancies in Vahan data. "AI-based detection has its flaws, and every violation must be manually validated before action is taken," the officer explained. Somu, a private driver, didn't mince words when discussing the issue. "Most people in the City don't know how to drive. There are too many vehicles, and the roads are bad. If I am in a hurry, I might drive a bit rashly too. When my boss needs to get somewhere on time, I have no choice."

The problem is compounded by the rise in private vehicle registrations. According to the Karnataka Transport Department, there was a 9 per cent increase in private vehicle registrations in 2024 compared to the previous year.

Over 6.44 lakh private vehicles, including two-wheelers and cars, were registered in just one year. Overall vehicle count in Bengaluru surpassed 1.19 crore—88 per cent of which are privately owned.

The need for stricter enforcement

Activists argue that stronger urban planning is crucial to reclaiming footpaths for pedestrians. "Authorities need to design streets so that motorists physically cannot get onto footpaths," said road safety activist Jenny Pinto. "Hefty fines and strict action against repeat offenders will help curb the problem."

Joint Commissioner of Traffic MN Anucheth acknowledged the seriousness of the issue. "We are booking cases through both contactless and physical enforcement, especially around schools and colleges.

First-time offenders are fined Rs 500 under the Motor Vehicles Act, while repeat offenders face FIRs and license cancellation," he said. *—Salar News*

Cong to hold AICC meet in Ahmedabad on 8-9 April

NEW DELHI, 23 FEB

The Congress announced that it will hold its AICC session in Gujarat's Ahmedabad on 8 and 9 April to deliberate on the challenges posed by the BJP's "anti-people" policies, its alleged attack on the Constitution and charting the party's future road map. Congress general secretary K C Venugopal, said the session will commence on 8 April with an extended Congress Working Committee meeting, followed by the AICC Delegates' meeting on 9 April. Congress will launch a massive, nationwide public outreach campaign called the Samvidhan Bachao. *—PTI*

Mehbooba accuses Speaker of imposing martial law

SRINAGAR, 23 FEB

PDP chief Mehbooba Mufti said the role of the speaker of an Assembly is to safeguard the rights of the members of the House and not act as a censor. Her remarks came after Jammu and Kashmir Assembly Speaker Abdul Rahim Rather took note of publicity of the House business notices ahead of the Budget session. "While Rather may be concerned with preserving the sanctity of legislative proceedings, as Speaker, his primary role is to safeguard the rights of members, not to act as a censor," former Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Mufti said on X. "Regrettably, it appears that Rather Sahab, a seasoned politician, is imposing a form of martial law while occupying a constitutional position," she added.*—PTI*

Court refuses chargesheet against ex MLA Rituraj

NEW DELHI, 23 FEB

A Delhi court has refused to take cognisance of a chargesheet against former AAP MLA Rituraj Govind Jha and others in a case of allegedly defying police order during a protest in March 2024. Additional Chief Judicial Magistrate Paras Dalal said even if it was assumed that he disobeyed the order, such disobedience was not shown to have caused any obstruction, annoyance or injury, to any anyone. On 24 March, 2024 Jha, along with councilor Ravindra Bhardwaj and other workers of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) gathered and started protesting when the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) was in effect and they tried to burn effigy of the prime minister and Enforcement Directorate. The accused were detained for defying police order and were charged under section 188 (disobedience to order of a public servant) IPC. *—PTI*

PHOTO: INSTAGRAM

Punjabi actor Sonia Mann joins AAP

CHANDIGARH, 23 FEB

Punjabi actress Sonia Mann, daughter of Kirti Kisan Union leader Baldev Singh, joined the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) on Sunday. She was welcomed into the party by AAP's national convenor, Arvind Kejriwal. AAP's Punjab unit announced her induction on X, stating, "Kirti Kisan Union leader S Baldev Singh Ji's daughter and Punjabi actress Sonia Mann joined Aam Aadmi Party under the leadership of National Convener Arvind Kejriwal. She is very welcome in the Aam Aadmi Party family." Sonia Mann is known for her work in the Punjabi film industry and has also acted in Malayalam, Hindi, Telugu, and Marathi films. The move comes as Arvind Kejriwal shifts his focus to Punjab following AAP's defeat in the 2025 Delhi Assembly elections. With two years to go for Punjab Assembly polls, Kejriwal aims to strengthen AAP's position. *—Agencies*

USAID row: Cong questions govt's silence on Trump

Cong says PM, EAM must answer on repeated Trump-Musk insults

NEW DELHI, 23 FEB

Jairam Ramesh, Congress general secretary in-charge PHOTO: PTI

Amid the USAID funding row, the Congress on Sunday accused the BJP of indulging in "anti-national work" by spreading "fake news from America" and asserted that Prime Minister Narendra Modi and External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar will also have to answer as to why the government is silent when US President Donald Trump and Elon Musk are "insulting" India repeatedly.

The BJP has rejected all such allegations of the Congress and called Rahul Gandhi a "traitor", accusing him of colluding with foreign forces in his bid to weaken India.

Congress general secretary in-charge Jairam Ramesh said, "BJP is a procession of liars and illiterates.The news about USD 21 million, on which the BJP and their bootlickers were jumping on, turned out to be fake.The USD 21 million in 2022 was not for 'voter turnout' in India, but for Bangladesh."

"Elon Musk made a fake claim, Trump got confused between Dhaka and Delhi, Amit Malviya spread the lie further, then the rest of BJP's bootlickers seized on it," he charged.

Ever since the Trump administration's DOGE said on February 16 that USAID has cancelled the USD 21 million funding for "voting in India", the BJP has been making fabricated allegations against the Congress, Ramesh said in his post in Hindi on X.

- The controversy is actually about two USAID grants on DOGE's list that were given through the Washington-based Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening, Ramesh said

The controversy is actually about two USAID grants on DOGE's list that were given through the Washington-based Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS), the Congress leader said. *—PTI*

POLITICAL RIFT

No place for OPS in AIADMK, says Palaniswani

CHENNAI, 23 FEB

PHOTO: ANI

The political landscape in Tamil Nadu is heating up as AIADMK general secretary Edappadi K Palaniswami hinted that expelled leader O. Panneersevlam (OPS) may not be welcomed back into the party. Writing to party cadres ahead of late Chief Minister J Jayalalithaa's birth anniversary, Palaniswami posed rhetorical questions about the coexistence of "the wolf and sheep," seemingly rebuffing OPS's recent assertion of a willingness to return to AIADMK. Panneersevlam, currently leading the ADMK Workers' Rights' Retrieval Committee, emphasized that unity could be achieved if all parties negotiate terms, including the election of the general secretary.

In a separate development, Chief Minister MK Stalin commented on the impact of Tamil Nadu's population control measures, indicating a potential reduction in the state's Lok Sabha seats due to the successful implementation of family planning programmes. Speaking at a wedding in his Kolathur constituency, he suggested that the forthcoming delimitation could lead to fewer parliamentary seats, saying, "Because we properly followed that continuously, there is a situation of reducing the number of Parliamentary seats."

With the assembly elections approaching, tensions within AIADMK and strategic concerns raised by Stalin could significantly influence the political dynamics. *—PTI*

Activists blacken Hindi nameboard

POLLACHI, 23 FEB

In the ongoing language controversy in Tamil Nadu, pro-Tamil activists defaced the Hindi inscription on a railway station nameboard at Pollachi Junction on Sunday. A viral video captured the activists applying black paint over the Hindi version of the station's name, prompting remedial actions. *—PTI*

Atishi to be first woman LOP in Delhi assembly

NEW DELHI, 23 FEB

PHOTO: PTI

Atishi, a former Delhi Chief Minister and MLA from Kalkaji, has made history by becoming the first woman to be elected as the Leader of Opposition (LoP) in the Delhi Assembly. The decision was made during a meeting of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) MLAs, where all 22 members reached a consensus in her favour, with MLA Sanjeev Jha nominating her for the role.

Expressing her gratitude to AAP Chief Arvind Kejriwal and her fellow MLAs, Atishi pledged to act as a robust opposition, ensuring that the ruling BJP government meets its commitments, including Prime Minister Modi's promise of providing Rs 2,500 to women by 8 March. The Delhi Assembly is set to convene for its first session on 24 February, during which the BJP government plans to present pending CAG reports regarding the previous AAP administration.

> **The condition which the (previous) government has left for us... when we sat with officers to review the financial status of the current government, we found that the government exchequer empty**
>
> -Rekha Gupta, Delhi Chief Minister

In a related development, newly appointed Chief Minister of Delhi, Rekha Gupta, accused the previous AAP government of leaving the public exchequer in a dire state. Addressing concerns about the implementation of the Mahila Samriddhi Yojna, Gupta assured that the Rs 2,500 monthly payment scheme for women would be executed with detailed planning, despite the alleged financial shortcomings of the prior government.

"The condition which the (previous) government has left for us... when we sat with officers to review the financial status of the current government, we found that the government exchequer empty," she said on a question about the preparation to implement the scheme. *—PTI*

Rajasthan MLAs continue dharna over suspensions

JAIPUR, 23 FEB

The deadlock between the opposition Congress and the government over minister Avinash Gehlot comment on former prime minister Indira Gandhi during the Question Hour on Friday continued with the Congress MLAs carrying on their 'dharna' in the Assembly.

The Congress MLAs have been sitting on the 'dharna' since Friday evening. They spent nights there, demanding that the comments be expunged from the proceedings and suspension of their six MLAs, including PCC chief Govind Singh Dotasra, be revoked.

Leader of Opposition Tikaram Jully said that the 'dharna' will continue if the demands are not met, adding that government does not want deadlock to end. *—PTI*

BJP's Naik to hold janata darbar in Shinde's Thane

THANE, 23 FEB

Maharashtra Forest Minister and BJP leader Ganesh Naik will on Monday hold a 'janata darbar' in Thane, a stronghold of Deputy Chief Minister and Shiv Sena president Eknath Shinde, the development coming amid buzz of disquiet in the ruling Mahayuti alliance.

Large hoardings have been put up for Naik's event to be held near the collector's office in Thane city.

There has been talk of unease in the ties between the BJP and Shiv Sena for the past few weeks, which once again came to the fore with Shinde's "do not take me lightly" warning on Friday. *—PTI*

India key to peacekeeping; women vital: UN Chief

UNITED NATIONS, 23 FEB

PHOTO: X

India remains a cornerstone of UN peacekeeping and its women peacekeepers have demonstrated that missions with greater female representation improve operational outcomes and contribute to lasting peace, the United Nations peacekeeping chief has said.

UN Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations Jean-Pierre Lacroix will visit New Delhi this week to attend the conference 'Enhancing the Role of Women in Peacekeeping: A Global South Experience' being organised by India on 24-25 February.

"India remains a cornerstone of UN peacekeeping" and "Indian women peacekeepers are redefining peacekeeping itself," Lacroix told PTI in an exclusive interview here.

Noting that it's a "privilege" to attend the conference in India, Lacroix said the gathering would bring together women officials from about 50 countries in the Global South to discuss the evolving challenges in peacekeeping and the critical role women play in advancing peace and security.

Lacroix said "India's women peacekeepers have proven to be indispensable in UN peacekeeping, forging trust between our uniformed personnel and local communities in some of the world's most challenging conflict zones. *—PTI*

Amid rift rumours with Cong, Tharoor says 'go watch match'

NEW DELHI, 23 FEB

PHOTO: PTI

Amidst reports that all is not well between him and the Congress following backlash from within the party on his apparent praise recently for the Kerala Left Democratic Front (LDF) government's industrial policy and also for Prime Minister Narendra Modi, MP Shashi Tharoor on Sunday refused to comment further on the subject.

"No comments at all," said the Congress MP from Thiruvananthapuram as reporters accosted him at the New Delhi airport today. Tharoor meanwhile urged the mediapersons to "Go watch the match; it's an important match today." The ICC Champions Trophy match between India and Pakistan began in Dubai this afternoon.

Tharoor had on Saturday posted on his X account the quote "Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise" by poet Thomas Gray.

This follows an interview to a Malayalam podcast, of a leading newspaper published from New Delhi today in its English edition, in which he noted that if the Congress did not try to expand its appeal, it would be sitting in opposition for the third consecutive time in Kerala.

Further, he was cited as saying that "several workers feel that there is an absence of a leader in Kerala's Congress."

He also said that he was elected as MP four times from Thiruvananthapuram and that if the Congress did not need his services, he had "other options" including speaking tours and books.

Assembly elections in Kerala is scheduled for 2026 and Tharoor claimed in the interview published in the newspaper today that opinion polls from independent agencies indicated he was "ahead of others in leadership stakes in Kerala." *—ANI*

'Will not rest till BJP fulfils J&K statehood promise'

JAMMU, 23 FEB

Jammu and Kashmir Congress president Tariq Hameed Karra on Sunday said his party would not rest till the central government fulfils its commitment to restore the Union Territory's statehood.

He also asked the local unit of the BJP to explain whether the commitment was another "jumla" of the Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led government.

Addressing a workers' convention at Muthi here as part of the Congress' 15-day campaign to press for restoration of statehood, Karra slammed the BJP for the "continued neglect of the most popular demand" of the people of Jammu and Kashmir by the Centre. In August 2019, Centre revoked Article 370 granting special status to J&K and also bifurcated erstwhile state into two UTs. *—PTI*

MANN KI BAAT

PM makes strong pitch for battling obesity

NEW DELHI, 23 FEB

Prime Minister Narendra Modi PHOTO: PTI

In a determined push against obesity, Prime Minister Narendra Modi urged citizens to reduce their oil consumption by 10 per cent during his monthly "Mann Ki Baat" radio address on Sunday. Modi highlighted that tackling obesity is not merely a personal issue but a collective responsibility towards one's family and society.

According to the Prime Minister, obesity rates have surged, with one in eight individuals reportedly affected and a fourfold increase observed among children. Quoting World Health Organisation data, he noted that approximately 250 crore people worldwide were classified as overweight in 2022.

"Minor adjustments can lead to significant change," Modi emphasised, suggesting that individuals cut their edible oil usage by a tenth each month. He likened this effort to a challenge that can be shared with ten others to create a broader impact.

Messages from prominent athletes, such as double Olympic medallist Neeraj Chopra and boxing champion Nikhat Zareen, reinforced the importance of a healthy lifestyle. Chopra shared his own experiences with weight management and encouraged parents to engage in outdoor activities with their children.

Meanwhile, cardiac surgeon Dr Devi Shetty expressed that obesity poses serious medical risks rather than just aesthetic concerns, linking it to poor dietary choices and excessive carbohydrate consumption.

Modi concluded by advocating for immediate action towards healthier eating habits, stating, "By making small changes, we can forge a fitter, disease-free future." The Prime Minister's approach encouraged citizens to embrace this challenge collectively for a healthier nation. *—PTI*

PM says slave mentality fuels mockery of faith

Chattarpur, 23 FEB

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday slammed a section of leaders over their critical remarks on Maha Kumbh, saying those with "slave mentality" keep attacking the country's religious and cultural traditions with the backing of foreign powers. "Many times, foreign powers too are seen trying to weaken the country and religion by supporting these people," Modi said. *—PTI*

Women leaders to take over PM's social media

NEW DELHI, 23 FEB

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has announced that he will hand over his social media accounts to women achievers from various fields on March 8, International Women's Day. During his "Mann Ki Baat" address, Modi called on the nation to celebrate the resilience and achievements of women, underlining the increasing representation of women across different sectors.

This initiative follows a similar gesture from 2020, during which Modi entrusted his social media platforms to seven notable women. With millions of followers across social media, Modi remains one of the most prominent global leaders online.

The Prime Minister emphasised the importance of addressing obesity, citing alarming statistics that show the prevalence of obesity has doubled in recent years, particularly among children. He urged citizens to reduce oil consumption by 10 per cent and encouraged participation in a challenge to promote healthier living.

Highlighting the contributions of women in India, Modi recalled Hansa Mehta's legacy, who advocated for recognising women's roles in shaping the nation.

He expressed pride in India's women's empowerment movement, stating that this year's Women's Day celebration would focus on their stories and experiences, inviting the public to engage through the Namo app. *—PTI*

SC to hear plea on drug shortage for HIV patients

NEW DELHI, 23 FEB

The Supreme Court of India is set to hear a plea regarding the alleged shortage of anti-retroviral (ARV) drugs crucial for treating HIV patients on Monday, 24 February. The petition, filed in 2022 by the NGO 'Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS' and others, raises concerns about the availability of these life-saving medications. In July 2023, the government informed the court that it was ensuring the availability of free, lifelong ARV drugs through its National AIDS Control Programme, claiming an adequate stock nationwide. While the petitioners' counsel acknowledged that there is currently no overall shortage of ARV drugs, they highlighted ongoing issues related to the procurement process and the quality of the medications. The court previously suggested a meeting involving the Centre, the National AIDS Control Organisation, and relevant NGOs to address these concerns. *—PTI*

PHOTO: X

2 held in Manipur for threatening security forces

IMPHAL, 23 FEB

Police have apprehended two members of the proscribed Kangleipak Communist Party (City Meitei) for releasing a video that threatened security forces over the arrest of certain village volunteers. Moirangthem Thoiba, aged 36, was arrested in Thamnapokpi, Bishnupur district, while Saikhom Lemburs Singh was detained in Imphal East district. Authorities revealed that Singh was also involved in extortion activities. In a separate operation, a joint team from Manipur Police and Assam Rifles arrested two cadres from the banned United National Liberation Front (K). The youths, identified as Wangkhem Rohit Singh and Thangjam Nongan Meetei, both 18 years old, were reportedly engaged in extorting money from local residents. *—PTI*

63-year-old man gets 25 years in jail for rape in Odisha

BARIPADA, 23 FEB

A 63-year-old man has been sentenced to 25 years of rigorous imprisonment by a special court in Mayurbhanj district, Odisha, for the repeated rape of a 14-year-old girl. The verdict was delivered by POCSO court judge Pratima Patro, who also imposed a fine of Rs 50,000 on the offender. Reports indicate that the assaults took place in 2022, with the accused threatening to kill the victim. The prosecution's case relied on the victim's testimony, statements from 18 witnesses, and pertinent medical reports. Additionally, the court recommended that the District Legal Services Authority provide Rs 7 lakh in compensation to the survivor. The rape case was initially registered at Baisinga police station on 27 July 2022. *—PTI*

Rescuers race against time to save 8 in T'gana tunnel

Despite repeated calls there is no response from those trapped

HYDERABAD, 23 FEB

Rescue operations underway after a section of the Srisailam Left Bank Canal (SLBC) project collapsed, in Nagarkurnool district PHOTO: PTI

Rescuers have inched closer to the engineers and workers trapped inside a tunnel after a section of the Srisailam Left Bank Canal project collapsed 24 hours ago. The incident occurred in Nagarkurnool district, about 150 m from Hyderabad, at 8.30 am on Saturday.

Despite repeated calls, there has been no response from those trapped inside the tunnel, sources said. Rescue teams have reached up to 13km inside the tunnel, just a short distance from the site of the collapse, where the Tunnel Boring Machine (TBM) was last located. Efforts to clear debris, including iron, muck, and cement blocks, are ongoing.

State Ministers N Uttam Kumar Reddy and J Krishna Rao have arrived at the site to oversee the operations. The rescue mission involves personnel from the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF), State Disaster Response Force (SDRF), Army, and the company's employees.

Of the eight people trapped, six (two engineers and four labourers) are from Jaiprakash Associates, while the other two are employees of a US-based company. On Saturday, 50 workers entered the tunnel in the first shift, along with the 200m-long TBM. They had reached 13.5 km inside when the roof suddenly collapsed. While 42 workers managed to escape, the eight trapped workers remain unaccounted for.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi contacted Telangana Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy to inquire about the situation and offered support for the ongoing rescue operation.

The construction work, which aims to draw water from the Srisailam project to irrigate 400,000 acres in Nalgonda district, had recently resumed.

Telangana authorities have vowed to expedite the rescue process, with Chief Minister Reddy closely monitoring the situation. *—PTI*

The second draft list for the Chooralmala Mundakkai landslide rehabilitation includes 81 families, raising the total to 323 PHOTO: ANI

Wayanad tense as landslide survivors protest

WAYANAD, 23 FEB

Tension flared in Chooralmala on Sunday morning as police intervened to prevent protesters from marching to condemn the alleged delay in rehabilitation efforts for survivors of the July 2024 landslides.

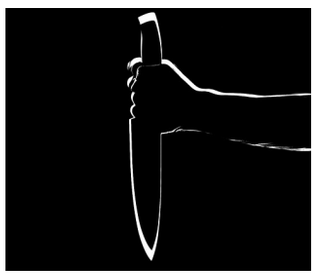
The demonstration commenced around 9am, with protesters constructing makeshift huts in the landslide-affected area. However, they were met by police who obstructed their march near Bailey Bridge, as shown by various news channels.

The protest, spearheaded by the Jana Shabdam Action Committee, faced resistance from law enforcement, leading to heated exchanges between the two parties.

The protesters are urgently calling for expedited rehabilitation and a more comprehensive relief package from the central government, beyond the initial allocation of 5 cents of land per family. The recently released second draft list for the Chooralmala Mundakkai landslide rehabilitation includes 81 families, raising the total to 323. Authorities have confirmed the uninhabitability of numerous homes in the disaster-stricken areas. This draft list was finalised after the survivors initiated their protest on Saturday. Initially, 242 families were identified in the first phase of aid. *—PTI*

Mizoram student killed by classmate in Kerala

T'PURAM, 23 FEB



- A group of students had been drinking alcohol together when an argument suddenly broke out. During the altercation, Valentine was stabbed. The injured student was rushed to a nearby private hospital.

An engineering student from Mizoram was allegedly stabbed to death by his college mate, who is also from the northeastern state, near their institute in this district, police said on Sunday.

The victim is VL Valentine, 23, a fourth-year student of a private engineering college in Nagaroor.

His collegemate, Lamsang Swala, 23, has been taken into custody in connection with the case, they added.

According to the police, the incident took place around 10.45pm on Saturday near the college.

A group of students had been drinking alcohol together when an argument suddenly broke out.

During the altercation, Valentine was stabbed. The injured student was rushed to a nearby private hospital.

He was later transferred to a private hospital in Thiruvananthapuram, but his life could not be saved, the police added. *—PTI*

RECORD OLIVE RIDLEY NESTING

Over 6.82 lakh endangered Olive Ridley turtles have gathered for mass nesting at the Rushikulya river mouth in Ganjam, Odisha, surpassing last year's record of 6.37 lakh. The nesting began on 16 February and is expected to continue as the numbers may rise further PHOTO: X/@PARVEENKASWAN

Woman raped after being promised film

THANE, 23 FEB

PHOTO: REPRESENTATIVE AI IMAGE

- The accused woman befriended the victim three years ago, claiming to have influential connections in Bollywood. She lured the victim to Singapore, where she was introduced to a man whom the accused claimed was powerful.

A 34-year-old woman has reported multiple rapes in Thane, with the alleged perpetrator promising her opportunities in the film industry. The police have also named another woman, her husband, and their daughter in the case for blackmailing and threatening the victim, who is from a Scheduled Caste and resides in the Majiwada area of Maharashtra.

The accused woman befriended the victim three years ago, claiming to have influential connections in Bollywood. She lured the victim to Singapore, where she was introduced to a man whom the accused claimed was powerful. It is alleged that the man raped the victim while intoxicated and that similar assaults took place at various hotels in Mumbai.

The accused woman is alleged to have recorded the victim in compromising situations and subsequently blackmailed her.

Following this, the accused trio reportedly harassed the victim, issuing threats and verbally abusing her while referencing her caste.

Following the victim's report, the police have registered a First Information Report (FIR) against the four suspects, charging them with rape, criminal intimidation, and other offences, including violations under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. The investigation is ongoing, with no arrests made as of yet. *—PTI*

BIHAR APPOINTS 140 OFFICERS TO PROTECT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE VICTIMS

PATNA, 23 FEB

The Bihar government has announced the appointment of 140 full-time 'protection officers' (POs) across the state to better assist women affected by domestic violence. This initiative, led by the Social Welfare Department, comes in response to the increasing number of domestic violence cases reported in the region.

Harjot Kaur Bamhrah, additional chief secretary of the Social Welfare Department, confirmed that a separate cadre of protection officers will be created, with 101 positioned at the sub-division level, 38 at the district level, and one at the state level. This move adheres to the provisions of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005.

Protection officers will play a crucial role by assisting magistrates, ensuring medical examinations for victims, and guaranteeing compliance with monetary relief orders. *—PTI*

M'rashtra seeks UNESCO status for Shivaji's forts

MUMBAI, 23 FEB

A high-profile delegation from Maharashtra, led by Cultural Affairs Minister Ashish Shelar, is in Paris to urge UNESCO to grant World Heritage status to 12 forts associated with Maratha king Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. The proposal, themed 'Maratha Military Landscape of India', includes forts such as Raigad, Rajgad, and Pratapgad, among others. Following directives from Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, the team aims to present a compelling case to UNESCO by highlighting the forts' historical and architectural significance. Shelar expressed gratitude to Prime Minister Narendra Modi for supporting the initiative. *—PTI*

B'desh artistes break ice, perform at Maha Kumbh

PRAYAGRAJ, 23 FEB

PHOTO: PTI

In a significant cultural exchange, a group of Bangladeshi performers graced the Maha Kumbh, marking the first official collaboration between India and Bangladesh following political turmoil in the latter. Sponsored in part by the Muhammad Yunus government, the six-member dance troupe showcased Gaudiya dance—rooted in Vaishnavism—at the Kumbh's 13,000-seater Ganga Pandal during the 10th India International Dance and Music Festival.

The event, held on 22 and 23 February was organised by the Uttar Pradesh government and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). This marks a notable return for Bangladesh, which had previously been absent from key Indian cultural events.

Leading the troupe, Rachel Priyanka Persis, an assistant professor from Dhaka University, expressed her gratitude for the opportunity to perform amidst the massive gathering, stating, "The Maha Kumbh carries a spiritual legacy of 144 years." *—PTI*

62 CR DEVOTEES ATTENDED MAHA KUMBH: UP CM

AGRA, 23 FEB

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath announced that approximately 62 crore devotees have attended the Maha Kumbh, labelling the gathering one of the "rarest events of the century." Speaking at the Unicorn Companies Conclave in Agra, he likened the event to a "Unicorn Maha Kumbh" for the startup world, highlighting its immense cultural significance.

Adityanath stressed the importance of reconnecting with India's spiritual roots and cultural heritage through the Kumbh, asserting that such a monumental assembly of people for spiritual or tourism purposes is unprecedented. *—PTI*

CLAIMS PEARSON SURVEY

62% of Indians fear accent bias in English test scores: Survey

NEW DELHI, 23 FEB

PHOTO: X

Over 62 per cent of Indian English test-takers believe their Indian accent negatively impacts their speaking test results, according to a recent Pearson survey. The report, based on insights from 1,000 respondents, highlights widespread concerns about bias in English language assessments.

The survey also found that 74 per cent of participants worry that their appearance could influence their scores when assessed by a human examiner, with 59 per cent fearing discrimination based on skin colour. Perceptions of bias are particularly strong in Maharashtra, where 67 per cent of respondents fear their dress could create a negative impression.

Over 63 per cent of test-takers, especially from Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu, believe adopting a non-Indian accent would improve their scores. Regional differences in perception were also notable, with 77 per cent of respondents in Punjab feeling that appearance affects test outcomes.

Prabhul Ravindran, Director of English Language Learning at Pearson India, emphasised the company's efforts to reduce bias by using AI-driven assessments that recognise over 125 accents.

Despite these concerns, India ranks above the global average for English speaking, with Delhi and Rajasthan leading the country. *—PTI*

IN REMEMBRANCE

Workers display a giant banner with portraits of late Hezbollah leaders Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah and Sayyed Hashem Safieddine, ahead of their funeral procession at Beirut's City Sportive stadium
PHOTO: PTI

Economy & migration in focus as Germany votes

Polls indicate that the current ruling coalition - SPD, Green and FDP will not be reelected. One major reason is that Germany is in its third year of recession, a first since WW2 ***PHOTO: ANI***

It was a short but sharply contested election campaign, in which one thing was clear: the desire for change. "You tried for three years to implement left-wing policies in Germany. You cannot continue with that anymore," said Friedrich Merz, the chancellor candidate for the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU).

He was addressing the center-left Social Democrats (SPD) and the environmentalist Greens, who had governed together with the neoliberal Free Democrats (FDP) since 2021. That fractious coalition collapsed in November, following months of infighting over the budget. The breakup led to the snap election being called for this Sunday.

The latest polling indicates that the Greens will get about the same share of the vote as they did back in 2021, but the SPD and FDP are set to suffer massive losses. The FDP may even fail to clear the 5% hurdle required for seats in the Bundestag, the German parliament. The SPD looks set for a bitter defeat. Anything less than 20 per cent would be the party's worst result in a federal election in Germany's post-World War II history — and the party is polling far below this.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz would become the government leader with the shortest term in office in the past 50 years and the only SPD chancellor ever not to be reelected.

According to the polls, Merz has the best chance of becoming chancellor. His center-right bloc became the largest opposition force in parliament in 2021, following 16 years in government under former Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Polling in second place is the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) expected to win a solid 20 per cent of the vote, which would be double its share in 2021.

Friedrich Merz points to the economy. "The economy of our country, the Federal Republic of Germany, has fallen behind in the European Union." About 50,000 businesses have gone into insolvency, about €100 billion worth of company capital per year has flowed overseas. "Our economy is shrinking; we have a recession for the third year in a row. That has never happened before in Germany's postwar history."

Scholz and his Economy Minister Robert Habeck, who is the Greens' candidate for chancellor, are "no longer in touch with reality," Merz said. "Do you know what they remind me of? Two managing directors employed by a company who have driven it into the ground and then go back to the owners and say: We would like to carry on like this for the next four years."

Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022 led to an energy crisis and inflation. "The economy has been struggling with the consequences ever since," Scholz said. Referring to the policy shift of the new US administration, Scholz has warned that there will be tough times ahead, "There is a rough wind blowing. And the truth is, that will not fundamentally change in the coming years."

How to fix the ailing economy was set to be one of the main issues of the election campaign. However, following a deadly knife attack by a rejected asylum seeker from Afghanistan in the Bavarian city of Aschaffenburg, the topic of immigration began to dominate political debate. Especially since, shortly following the crime, Merz attempted to tighten Germany's asylum policies even before the election. For this, he was willing to accept support from the AfD in parliament.

AfD lawmakers rejoiced when, in late January, Merz's non-binding motion gained a majority in the Bundestag with the help of the AfD for the first time. "A new era is beginning here and now," said Bernd Baumann, AfD parliamentary group leader. "Something new is starting now, and we are leading it."

Following the Bundestag vote, hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated nationwide against a shift to the right in Germany, while Scholz and his party accused the CDU and AfD of intending to form a coalition government after the election.

In the following days and weeks, Merz took every opportunity to rule out any cooperation with the AfD, explaining that the right-wing extremists are out to destroy the CDU and CSU. The CDU/CSU would not form a coalition with the AfD under any circumstances, he vowed, even though the German electon system is designed to favour coalition governments. *—DW News*

SALAR سالار

How Cocomelon hampers critical brain development

When adults hear the term "kid-friendly" in regards to entertainment, a familiar image often springs to mind: vibrant colors, catchy tunes and straightforward narratives. It's a mental shorthand that reflects the surface elements that many people associate with children's entertainment. And, indeed, a significant portion of kids' shows fit snugly into this mold, delivering exactly what one might expect.

However, appearances can be deceiving. While these shows may possess all the hallmarks of child-centric programming, their actual impact on young viewers can vary. The notion of a show being "kid-friendly" extends much further beyond entertainment value than what parents might think. In reality, some seemingly innocuous shows may not only fail to benefit children, but could even pose potential risks to their well-being and functioning.

Here's why that is, which kids' shows are the main culprits, as well as a list of alternatives that parents can let their kids watch guilt-free.

Pace

Fast-paced children's shows can, at surface level, seem very captivating for young audiences—with fun, rapid visuals and frenetic storytelling. However, studies show that even brief exposure to fast-paced programming can have detrimental effects on executive functioning—the mental processes responsible for planning, problem-solving and impulse control.

According to a 2011 study from the American Academy of Pediatrics, just nine minutes alone of exposure to fast-paced cartoons led to diminished executive functioning in preschool-aged children. The rapid succession of stimuli overwhelms the brain's capacity to process information effectively, resulting in decreased attention spans and difficulties with self-regulation.

Furthermore, the relentless pace of these shows may contribute to a need for instant gratification, where children expect constant stimulation and struggle to engage in activities that require sustained effort and concentration. So, while fast-paced children's television may offer short-lived entertainment, their potential long-term impacts raise some concerns.

Under-stimulation and over-stimulation

There is a complex interplay of sensory input involved media consumption, which has been shown to shape children's brains in unforeseen ways. According to research from Dr. Susan R. Johnson—a behavioral and developmental pediatrician—watching television has been likened to multilevel sensory deprivation, where the passive consumption of audiovisual stimuli fails to engage the full spectrum of sensory experiences necessary for healthy brain development.

Shockingly, Johnson explains that prolonged lack of balanced stimulation of all senses can lead to a decrease in brain size, with a 20–30 per cent reduction observed in children who lack tactile stimulation and meaningful human interaction.

On the other hand, however, the overstimulating nature of television—characterized by flashing, colored, fluorescent images and poor-quality sound reproduction—can overwhelm the sensory organs, leading to disruptions in their development and function.

The limited engagement of only two senses—paired with the overstimulation of hearing and sight—fails to provide the appropriate sensory experiences necessary for refining neural connections, nor essential cognitive skills. Thus, while kids' shows may offer a convenient source of entertainment, their impact on the developing brain is nowhere near worth the risks they pose.

Given these concerning findings, there are several shows that parents may want to consider writing off from their children's viewing repertoire.

Ms. Rachel is another beloved show that kids may struggle to let go of, but that parents might want to think twice about. The high-energy antics and vibrant visuals of Ms. Rachel may be more overwhelming than educational, which can disrupt both sensory development and cognitive function.

It's important to stay mindful of the fact that children's content is often designed to prioritize overstimulation and addiction. Appearance alone doesn't guarantee safety; just because it looks kid friendly, it doesn't mean that their effects are. By staying informed and watching alongside your children, you can assess their impacts firsthand. *—Forbes*

The relentless pace of the shows may cause children to need instant gratification ***PHOTO: X***

LETTERS write to us at salarenglishdigital@gmail.com

AI is transforming education but impacting child development

Experts caution against using AI for the education of young children ***PHOTO: FREEPIK***

- AI should complement, rather than replace, traditional teaching methods, ensuring that students continue to benefit from human interaction and hands-on experiences

Artificial intelligence is revolutionizing industries across the globe, and education is no exception. From personalized learning experiences to administrative efficiency, AI is reshaping classrooms and redefining the roles of both teachers and students.

However, as AI's influence in education expands, experts warn of potential drawbacks — particularly when it comes to young children.

AI-powered tools are becoming increasingly prevalent in education. According to a 2024 report by the UK-based digital safety organization Internet Matters, nearly 44 percent of children are currently using AI, and 54 percent have incorporated it into school assignments.

The report, titled "Artificially Intelligent? Children's and parents' views on generative AI in education," found that teachers, too, are integrating AI into their daily tasks, with 60 percent reporting that they use the technology to enhance their work.

The adoption of AI in education reflects a broader global trend. Experts at Allied Market Research project the market for AI-driven educational tools will grow from $2.5 billion in 2022 to $6 billion by the end of 2025, highlighting the increasing reliance on technology in schools.

In Saudi Arabia, the government has embraced AI's potential in various sectors, including education. The Saudi Authority for Data and Artificial Intelligence, established in 2019, aims to drive innovation in AI and position the Kingdom at the forefront of data-driven economies.

For educators, AI presents exciting opportunities to enhance learning experiences.

"AI has transformed education by personalizing learning experiences, allowing for tailored content that meets individual student needs," Faleh bin Saad Al-Huqbani, director of Al-Muqaddimah Schools in Riyadh, told Arab News.

By adapting content to a child's pace and learning style, AI enables more individualized instruction, helping students grasp difficult concepts with greater ease. Additionally, AI-powered tutoring systems provide real-time feedback and support, reinforcing learning outside the classroom.

"AI tools can engage children with interactive and gamified learning environments, making education more enjoyable," Al-Huqbani added.

Beyond the classroom, AI is also streamlining administrative tasks, allowing educators to focus more on teaching rather than paperwork. Automated grading systems, data analysis tools, and AI-powered lesson planning are freeing up valuable time for teachers to engage with students more effectively.

While AI's impact on education is largely positive, some experts caution against its overuse — especially among young children.

Dr. Sultan Ayoub Meo, professor of physiology at the College of Medicine at King Saud University, stresses the importance of cognitive development in early childhood, warning that excessive reliance on AI and electronic devices could have unintended consequences.

"It is not just a natural biological maturation; it is shaped by the infant's experiences and interactions with their environment," Dr. Meo told Arab News.

"Children's cognitive development from birth to 5 years of age is critical due to rapid brain growth and acquiring initial knowledge in thinking, learning, problem-solving, language, and understanding."

Dr. Meo believes AI has an important role to play in higher education, but he does not recommend its use for children under the age of 6.

"In this age group, the most important and highly sensitive systems, nervous and endocrine systems, and their physiological processes are rapidly developing," he said.

He also pointed out potential health risks associated with prolonged exposure to AI-enabled devices. "Using AI for children at the age of 6 can cause behavioral and psychological issues," he said.

"We cannot deny the effects of electromagnetic field radiation generated by AI-allied devices and their hazards on various body organs, including the brain, ears, and eyes, especially in infants and children."

Despite these concerns, Dr. Meo acknowledges that AI is now an integral part of education and research.

"This is the era of science and technology," he said. "The future of digital education is extremely important in academia and research. Digital education makes knowledge easily accessible and enables students to access the same knowledge resources."

In addition to making education more accessible, AI facilitates lifelong learning and skill acquisition, helping students meet the demands of an evolving job market. However, Dr. Meo highlighted the importance of being selective in how and when AI is introduced in the classroom.

"It will be helpful at higher school and university levels rather than primary schooling," he said. "Digital education at primary school levels may replace real-world learning and human interaction."

While AI's impact on education is undeniable, experts agree that a balanced approach is necessary. AI should complement, rather than replace, traditional teaching methods, ensuring that students continue to benefit from human interaction and hands-on learning experiences.

"We must balance technology with traditional teaching and learning methods," Dr. Meo added. *—Arab News*

PHOTO: X

Bangladesh, Pakistan resume direct trade

ISLAMABAD, 23 FEB

Pakistan and Bangladesh have resumed direct trade for the first time since the 1971 separation, with the first government-approved cargo departing from Port Qasim, a media report said. The agreement was finalised in early February when Bangladesh agreed to purchase 50,000 tonnes of Pakistani rice through the Trading Corporation of Pakistan. "For the first time, a Pakistan National Shipping Corporation vessel carrying government cargo will dock at a Bangladeshi port, marking a significant milestone in maritime trade relations," The Express Tribune newspaper reported. The development is seen as a positive step in fostering economic cooperation and reopening trade channels that remained dormant for decades. —PTI

China denies Aus claim of drills without warning

BEIJING, 23 FEB

China's Defence Ministry on Sunday said Australia had made "unreasonable accusations" and deliberately hyped the situation after three planes headed to New Zealand changed course in midflight because of live-fire drills by the Chinese navy. Wu Qian, the ministry's top spokesperson, said China had issued safety notices in advance and that the activity was in compliance with international law and did not affect aviation safety. "The relevant remarks from the Australian side are completely inconsistent with the facts," he said in a response posted on the Defence Ministry website. Three passenger flights from Sydney to Christchurch and Queenstown were in the air Friday when they were first warned by a Chinese warship of a live-fire exercise, Australian media reported. —PTI

Pakistan threatens to send back Afghan refugees

ISLAMABAD, 23 FEB

Pakistan has issued a warning that Afghan refugees not approved for resettlement by the United States will be treated as illegal immigrants and face deportation. Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar stated in an interview with TRT, "If any refugee was meant to be taken by another country and that does not happen, that person will be considered an illegal immigrant in Pakistan." Since the Taliban takeover in August 2021, approximately 600,000 Afghans have fled to Pakistan. Recent developments indicate that Pakistan may end the reprieve for Afghan refugees awaiting resettlement, raising concerns of potential deportations. —PTI

24 injured in Nepal as protesters clash with security men

KATHMANDU, 23 FEB

At least 24 people, including 12 security personnel, were injured in clashes between security forces and protesters opposing a cable car project in the Pathibhara area of Taplejung district in eastern Nepal, officials said on Sunday. The 'No Cable Car' group has been protesting against the construction of the cable car in the Pathibhara region, citing concerns that the project would erase the region's historical identity. On Saturday evening, at least 24 people, including 12 security personnel, were injured when clashes erupted between security forces and the 'No Cable Car group' in Phungling, officials said. They added that police have arrested 15 people for their involvement in violence. The gathering of more than five people will not be allowed in the restricted zones, they said. —PTI

Germany votes amid economic concerns

The centre-right opposition, led by Friedrich Merz, is positioned to emerge victorious

BERLIN, 23 FEB

Germany is heading to the polls on Sunday in an election marked by significant discontent over the long-standing stagnation of its economy, escalating migration issues, and uncertainty surrounding the future of Ukraine. With over 59 million eligible voters in a nation of 84 million, the focus is on shaping the next government amid a rise in far-right support.

The centre-right opposition, led by Friedrich Merz, is positioned to emerge victorious, with recent polls suggesting his Union bloc could garner 28-32 per cent of the votes. The ruling Social Democrats, led by Chancellor Olaf Scholz, are projected to receive approximately 14-16 per cent – potentially their worst post-war election result. Meanwhile, the far-right Alternative for Germany is polling at around 20 per cent, a record high, despite other parties' refusal to ally with them, a stance known as the "firewall".

This election comes seven months earlier than planned after Scholz's coalition fractured in November amidst persistent internal strife. With no party expected to achieve an outright majority, coalition negotiations could prove lengthy and complex. Merz aims to provide "stability instead of chaos," but may require more than one partner to form a government, potentially including the Greens or the pro-business Free Democrats.

- This election comes seven months earlier than planned after Scholz's coalition fractured in November amidst persistent internal strife

Key issues include contrasting economic strategies, with candidates promoting differing approaches to revive a shrinking economy. Migration has surged to the forefront, particularly following recent violent incidents tied to immigrants. Merz has pledged to tighten border controls and increase deportations, policies that have sparked fierce debate from his rivals.

With the future of defence spending and support for Ukraine also at stake, the outcome is poised to significantly influence Germany's trajectory. The results are expected on Monday. —PTI

The outcome, which will be known on Monday, is poised to significantly influence Germany's trajectory PHOTO: ALJAZEERA

Israel protests 'humiliating' acts at hostage handovers

TEL AVIV, 23 FEB

Israel says the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners is delayed "until the release of the next hostages has been assured, and without the humiliating ceremonies" at handovers of Israeli captives in Gaza.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's statement came on Sunday as vehicles carrying prisoners left the open gates of Ofer prison, only to turn around and go back in.

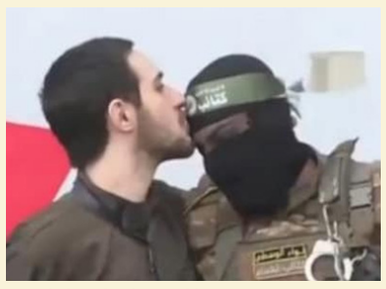
The release of 620 Palestinian prisoners had been delayed for several hours and was meant to occur just after six Israeli hostages were released on Saturday. It was to be the largest one-day prisoner release in the ceasefire's first phase.

Five of the six hostages freed on Saturday were escorted by masked, armed militants in front of a crowd – a display that the UN and others have criticised as cruel after previous handovers.

The Israeli statement cited "ceremonies that demean the dignity of our hostages and the cynical use of the hostages for propaganda purposes". It was a likely reference to a Hamas video showing two hostages who have yet to be released watching a handover in Gaza on Saturday.

Hamas had released the last six living hostages expected under the ceasefire's first phase, with a week remaining in the initial stage. They included three Israeli men seized from the Nova music festival and another taken while visiting family in southern Israel during the 7 October, 2023, attack. —PTI

FREED ISRAELI HOSTAGE WHO KISSED HAMAS MEN WAS 'TOLD TO DO SO'



Omer Shem Tov, one of the hostages released by Hamas on Saturday, kissed two of his captors on stage and blew kisses to the crowd before being released after more than 500 days. According to Daily Express, Tov has now claimed that he kissed his captors under pressure and he was "told to do so." "He said they told him what to do. You can see in the footage that someone came up to him and told him what to do," Tov's father said. —Agencies

Giorgia Meloni PHOTO: X

Meloni flays Left's double standards on conservatism

WASHINGTON, 23 FEB

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has condemned the Left's "double standards" regarding perceptions of conservative leaders worldwide. Speaking via video link at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington, Meloni argued that while she, US President Donald Trump, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi are deemed "threats to democracy," leftist leaders are celebrated for similar partnerships.

Meloni pointed out that the former collaboration between Bill Clinton and Tony Blair in the 1990s was lauded, contrasting it with the current criticism faced by conservative figures. "Their irritation has turned into hysteria, not only because conservatives are winning, but because they are collaborating globally," she stated.

She emphasised that citizens are rallying behind conservative values such as national security, business preservation, and family life, rebuffing what she termed "green leftist insanity."

Meloni also expressed confidence in the enduring ties between the US and Europe under Trump, despite recent tensions over issues like Ukraine, asserting that adversaries hoping for division will be proven wrong. —PTI

PERFORMANCE CHECK

Musk gives federal staff 48hrs to list what they did last week

NEW YORK, 23 FEB

In a dramatic move aimed at reducing perceived waste within the federal government, billionaire Elon Musk has given federal employees a mere 48 hours to outline their achievements from the previous week. Serving in his role as President Donald Trump's cost-cutting chief, Musk shared the unusual request on his social media platform, X.

"Consistent with President @realDonaldTrump's instructions, all federal employees will shortly receive an email requesting to understand what they got done last week," Musk posted. He warned that failure to respond would be regarded as a resignation.

Federal employees received a terse email instructing them to summarise their accomplishments in approximately five bullet points and to copy their manager on the response, with a deadline set for Monday at 11.59pm

> **Donald Trump, his team, are very much focused on continuing negotiations with both sides of Ukraine-Russia war to end the conflict, and the president is very confident we can get it done this week**
>
> —White House

This new directive follows a wave of job losses across federal agencies, with many workers either dismissed or offered buyouts since Trump's administration began. Significant cuts have impacted the Departments of Veterans Affairs, Defence, Health and Human Services, Internal Revenue Service, and National Parks Service, among others, affecting hundreds of thousands of employees, including those outside the capital.—PTI

Patel urges FBI to pause response to Musk's mail

WASHINGTON, 23 FEB

Hours after Elon Musk warned all US federal employees over their jobs if they failed to submit a detailed work report, FBI director Kash Patel instructed his staff to "pause any responses", saying that the agency is in charge of all its reviews.

employees of the National Security Agency (NSA) were also told to hold off on responding to the productivity inquiry until further notice from the Department of Defence.

Meanwhile, US President Donald Trump is expected to appoint newly confirmed FBI Director Kash Patel as the acting head of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), a law enforcement agency under the Department of Justice, The Hill reported. —PTI

STATES WARN AGAINST DEFYING IMMIGRATION CRACKDOWN

Republican state lawmakers seeking to aid President Donald Trump's crackdown on illegal immigration are threatening local officials who resist with lawsuits, fines and even potential jail term. Lawmakers in more than 20 states this year have filed legislation targeting so-called sanctuary policies that limit cooperation with federal immigration authorities, according to an Associated Press analysis using the bill-tracking software Plural. —Agencies

Knife attack kills 1, injures 3 in France

PARIS, 23 FEB

One person was killed and several others left wounded in a knife attack at a town market in eastern France, which authorities described as an act of terror, CNN reported.

The attacker shouted "Allahu Akbar" (God is Greatest) while targeting several municipal police officers as well as a passerby, the prosecutor's office said. A civilian has died, and three officers are injured, the report said.

The suspect was later arrested and is currently in police custody, the prosecutor's office confirmed. The 37-year-old suspect is from Algeria.

"Horror has just gripped our city. A man attacked passers-by at the cvered canal market with a knife, several municipal police officers who intervened to neutralize him were also injured," Mulhouse mayor Michèle Lutz said.

French President Emmanuel Macron strongly condemned the incident, describing it as "no doubt, an Islamic terrorist act, given the terrorist's words," as reported by CNN.

French Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau said that the suspect had previously been convicted for apology of terrorism – the crime of speaking positively of a terror act or group. —ANI

- French President Emmanuel Macron strongly condemned the incident, describing it as "no doubt, an Islamic terrorist act, given the terrorist's words," reported the CNN

Pope rested during peaceful night, says Vatican

ROME, 23 FEB

Pope Francis, in critical condition with a complicated lung infection, rested well during a peaceful night following a respiratory crisis and blood transfusions, the Vatican said on Sunday.

Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni's one-line statement didn't mention if Francis was up or eating breakfast.

"The night passed quietly, the pope rested," Bruni said on Sunday morning.

The brief update came after doctors said the 88-year-old pope, who had part of one lung removed as a young man, was in critical condition. On Saturday morning, he suffered a prolonged asthmatic respiratory crisis while being treated for pneumonia and a complex lung infection.

The pope received "high flows" of oxygen to help him breathe. He also received blood transfusions after tests showed low counts of platelets, which are needed for clotting, the Vatican said in a late update.

The Saturday statement also said that the pontiff "continues to be alert and spent the day in an armchair although in more pain than yesterday". Doctors said the prognosis was "reserved".

Doctors have said Francis' condition is touch-and-go, given his age, fragility and pre-existing lung disease.

They have warned that the main threat facing Francis would be the onset of sepsis, a serious infection of the blood that can occur as a complication of pneumonia. —PTI

Congo Prez announces 'unity' govt

KINSHASA, 13 FEB

President Felix Tshisekedi has announced the formation of a unity government in response to escalating violence in eastern Congo. This statement comes as Rwandan-backed M23 rebels have captured significant cities, intensifying scrutiny over his leadership during the crisis.

Addressing a meeting of the Sacred Union of the Nation ruling coalition on Saturday, Tshisekedi acknowledged the gravity of the situation, stating, "I lost the battle and not the war. I must reach out to everyone including the opposition. There will be a government of national unity." However, he did not provide details regarding the composition or timeline of this proposed government.

In his address, Tshisekedi also honoured fallen soldiers and pledged to strengthen the national army amid this turbulent period. —PTI

Afghan women's radio to resume after ban lifted

KABUL, 23 FEB

An Afghan women's radio station will resume broadcasts after the Taliban suspended its operations, citing "unauthorised provision" of content to an overseas TV channel and improperly using its license.

Radio Begum launched on International Women's Day in March 2021, five months before the Taliban seized power amid the chaotic withdrawal of US and NATO troops.

The station's content is produced entirely by Afghan women. Its sister satellite channel, Begum TV, operates from France and broadcasts programmes that cover the Afghan school curriculum from seventh to 12th grade.

In a statement issued Saturday night, the Taliban's Information and Culture Ministry said Radio Begum had "repeatedly requested" to restart operations and that the suspension was lifted after the station made commitments to authorities. The station pledged to conduct broadcasts "in accordance with the principles of journalism and the regulations of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and to avoid any violations in the future", it added. —PTI

FULLY FINANCED BY CHINA

Pak airport shrouded in mystery; lack passengers, planes

GWADAR, 23 FEB

Pakistan's latest and most expensive airport, the New Gwadar International Airport, remains shrouded in uncertainty, with no flights or passengers since its completion in October 2024. This $240 million project, entirely financed by China, was intended as a key feature of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), aimed at linking Xinjiang province to the Arabian Sea.

Despite expectations of transformation, locals in Gwadar, a city home to around 90,000 residents, report little change. The airport, which boasts a capacity of 400,000 passengers, is not seen as a priority for a city struggling with power shortages, relying on electricity from Iran or solar energy.

The airport, which boasts a capacity of 4,00,000 passengers, is not seen as a priority for a city struggling with power shortages PHOTO: X

Azeem Khalid, an international relations expert, claims the airport primarily serves Chinese interests, granting them secure access to Gwadar and Balochistan. The region has been marred by longstanding unrest, with separatists fighting against perceived state exploitation and discrimination.

As security concerns mount, the Pakistani government has bolstered its military presence in Gwadar, aiming to protect Chinese investments. Yet, local residents express frustration – no job opportunities have arisen from the airport's development, with claims that not a single Gwadar resident has found employment there.

Abdul Ghafoor Hoth, president of the Balochistan Awami Party, voiced dissatisfaction, noting the lack of local hires and accusing the government of neglect. Meanwhile, demands for improved living conditions remain unmet, leaving residents to question the true benefits of CPEC and its associated projects. —PTI

India's coal imports flat at 201 MT in Apr-Dec

NEW DELHI, 23 FEB

India's coal imports remained flat at 201.30 million tonnes (MT) in the April-December period of the ongoing financial year. The country's coal import was 201.52 MT in the year-ago period, according to the data compiled by mjunction services, a leading name in the e-auction space. Coal import in December declined to 19.28 MT over 23.35 MT in the corresponding month of the previous fiscal year. Coal and Mines Minister G Kishan Reddy recently said reducing coal imports and increasing domestic production is the focus. *—PTI*

PHOTO:X

Handloom exports from Kashmir at Rs 2,567 cr in 2 yrs

SRINAGAR, 23 FEB

Kashmir exported its famed handicraft and handloom products worth Rs 2,567 crore in over last two fiscal years, officials said on Sunday. This export figure is expected to touch Rs 3,000 crore by the end of this fiscal year (March 2025). However, the exports in the current financial year have been hit by global conflicts. As per the figures available with Handicrafts and Handloom Department, Kashmir, while Kani and Sozni shawls exports stood at Rs 1,105 crore, hand-knotted carpet shipments were worth Rs 728 crore in the last three years. The lab will be further strengthened after more staff undergoes necessary training at the Wool Research Association, Thane. *—PTI*

Godrej to double Process Equip biz turnover

DAHEJ, 23 FEB

Godrej Enterprises Group looks to double the turnover of its Process Equipment business in the next four to five years, helped by the green energy transition happening across the globe, an official said. Moreover, the company is investing Rs 200 crore in the second phase of its Dahej Plant to expand the annual manufacturing capacity to approximately 30,000MT from the existing 23,000MT. However, the Process Equipment division is simultaneously down-sizing operations at the Vikhroli plant in Mumbai due to logistical challenges, its Executive Vice President and Business Head Hussain Shariyarr said. The fresh investment is in addition to Rs 300 crore invested by Godrej Enterprises.*—PTI*

SBI

PHOTO: X

SBI aims to be Net-Zero by 2055: Setty

MUMBAI, 23 FEB

State Bank of India Chairman C S Setty on Sunday said the largest Indian lender is targeting to be Net-Zero by 2055. The bank will be celebrating its centenary year of existence then, he said. Setty made the remarks after flagging off the "SBI Green Marathon Season 5" event in the financial capital, according to a statement. Over 10,000 runners participated in the 5km, 10km and 21 km categories of the event held here. There will be similar events in Vizag, Lucknow, Chandigarh, Ahmedabad, Pune, Guwahati, Bhubaneswar, and Patna. Running legends Vinod Kumar Sharma, Barun Kumar, Vishak Krishnaswamy, Ashish Arya, Sarika Jain, Raj Gandhi and Rinkoo Singh were present at event, the statement said.*—PTI*

Mcap of eight of top-10 firms fall ₹1.65 lakh crore

TCS was biggest hit, in line with bearish trends in equities

NEW DELHI, 23 FEB

The combined market valuation of eight of the top-10 most valued firms eroded Rs 1,65,784.9 crore last week, with Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) taking the biggest hit, in line with bearish trends in equities.

Last week, the BSE benchmark declined 628.15 points, or 0.82 per cent, while the Nifty went lower 133.35 points, or 0.58 per cent.

The market valuation of TCS tanked Rs 53,185.89 crore to Rs 13,69,717.48 crore.

Bharti Airtel's market capitalisation (mcap) dropped Rs 44,407.77 crore to Rs 9,34,223.77 crore.

The valuation of ICICI Bank tumbled Rs 18,235.45 crore to Rs 8,70,579.68 crore and that of Hindustan Unilever plunged Rs 17,962.62 crore to Rs 5,26,684.38 crore.

Infosys faced an erosion of Rs 17,086.61 crore to Rs 7,53,700.15 crore from its market valuation.

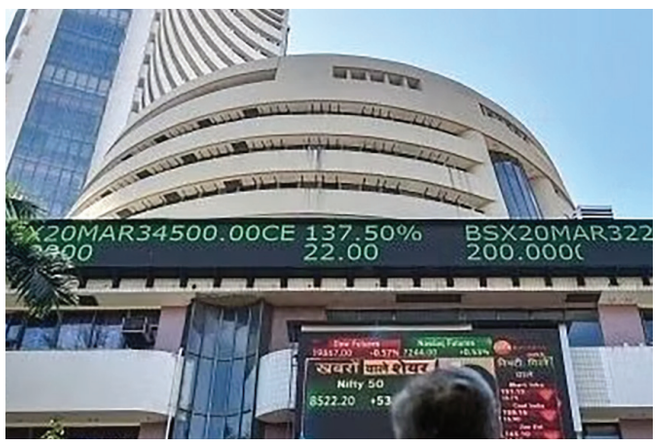
The mcap of ITC eroded Rs 11,949.42 crore to Rs 5,01,750.43 crore and that of HDFC Bank diminished Rs 2,555.53 crore to Rs 12,94,152.82 crore.

State Bank of India's valuation declined Rs 401.61 crore to Rs 6,43,955.96 crore.

However, the mcap of Reliance Industries jumped Rs 14,547.3 crore to Rs 16,61,369.42 crore.

Bajaj Finance added Rs 384.33 crore to Rs 5,20,466.75 crore in its mcap.

Reliance Industries remained the most valued firm followed by TCS, HDFC Bank, Bharti Airtel, ICICI Bank, Infosys, State Bank of India, Hindustan Unilever, Bajaj Finance, and ITC. *—PTI*



Last week, the BSE benchmark declined 628.15 points, or 0.82 per cent, while the Nifty went lower 133.35 points, or 0.58 per cent *PHOTO: PTI*

- Reliance Industries remained the most valued firm followed by TCS, HDFC Bank, Bharti Airtel, ICICI Bank, Infosys, State Bank of India, Hindustan Unilever, Bajaj Finance, and ITC

IN RAJASTHAN

USFDA pulls up Jagsonpal Pharma for mfg lapses

NEW DELHI, 23 FEB

The US health regulator has pulled up Jagsonpal Pharmaceuticals for significant manufacturing lapses at its Rajasthan-based active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs) plant.

In a warning letter issued to the company's Managing Director Manish Gupta, the US Food and Drug Administration (USFDA) noted that the correspondence summarizes significant deviations from Current Good Manufacturing Practice for APIs.

The US health regulator stated that it inspected the company's Bhiwadi- based plant in Rajasthan on 20 March, 27 March, and 3 April, 2024. "This warning letter summarises significant deviations from Current Good Manufacturing Practice (CGMP) for APIs. Because the methods, facilities, or controls for manufacturing, processing, packing, or holding do not conform to CGMP, your API is adulterated," the USFDA stated in the warning letter.

A warning letter issued by the USFDA usually identifies the violation, such as poor manufacturing practices, problems with claims for what a product can do, or incorrect directions for use.

The letter also makes clear that the company must correct the problem and provides directions and a timeframe of its plans for correction. FDA then checks to ensure that the company's corrections are adequate. Based upon the nature of the deviations identified, the company should engage a consultant qualified to evaluate operations and to assist in meeting CGMP requirements, it said. *—PTI*

Industry experts predict average wage increase of 4-8%*PHOTO: FREEPIK*

Moderate pay hikes likely in IT sector

NEW DELHI, 23 FEB

Salary increments in India's USD 250B IT services sector are projected to be moderate in fiscal year 2025, as companies navigate a complex landscape of global economic uncertainties, evolving skill demands and the increasing adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI), according to experts.

Industry experts predict an average wage increase of 4-8.5 per cent, a notable step down from previous years, signalling a shift towards more pragmatic compensation strategies.

"The outlook for salary hikes this year is quite cautious," noted Krishna Vij, VP, TeamLease Digital. "Industry players are looking at increments in the 4 per cent to 8.5 per cent range, which is lower than what we've seen in previous years. This slowdown is largely due to global economic challenges, reduced discretionary spending, and shifting business priorities."

Companies are being more conservative with their salary budgets, and many have even pushed their appraisal cycles beyond the usual April-June period, she said, which has made salary revisions less predictable in the current scenario.

"Organisations are shifting to skills-based pay, leveraging Tier II hiring for cost efficiency. Instead of salary hikes, retention bonuses, ESOPs, and project-based incentives are being implemented as compensation strategies," Vij said.

Reed & Willow CEO Janoo Motiani said, "The average hikes are expected to hover between 5 per cent and 8.5 per cent. This aligns with the cautious optimism seen across the sector." *—PTI*

Adani Group pays Rs 58,104 cr tax in FY24

NEW DELHI, 23 FEB

Ports-to-power conglomerate Adani Group on Sunday said group companies paid Rs 58,104 crore in taxes in 2023-24, up from Rs 46,610 crore in the previous financial year.

The taxes paid include direct contributions like global taxes, duties and other charges borne by Adani portfolio of companies, indirect taxes contributions and duties collected and paid on behalf of other stakeholders, and other levies such as social security contributed for the benefit of the employees.

The conglomerate helmed by billionaire Gautam Adani released its Tax Transparency Reports for financial year 2023-24 (April 2023 to March 2024).

The details are covered in the independent reports published by seven of the group's listed entities - Adani Enterprises, Adani Ports and Special Economic Zone, Adani Green Energy, Adani Energy Solutions, Adani Power, Adani Total Gas, and Ambuja Cements.

The figure also includes the tax paid by three other listed companies — NDTV, ACC and Sanghi Industries - that are held by the seven companies.

With the global tax environment entering a new age, forward-looking companies are voluntarily bringing out the Tax Transparency Report, even though the same is not mandatory.

Through the report, such companies seek to drive wider stakeholder attention and greater credibility, besides creating the basis for the highest standards of tax transparency.

Tax Transparency Report provides a complete breakdown of Adani Group's global tax and other contributions. Adani said it engaged a professional agency to provide an independent assurance report on its global contribution to the exchequer. *—PTI*

PHOTO:X

- The taxes paid include direct contributions like global taxes, duties and other charges borne by Adani portfolio of companies, indirect taxes contributions and duties collected

Forex snaps 3 week gains; fall $2.5B

NEW DELHI, 23 FEB

India's foreign exchange reserves slumped in the week that ended on 14 February, reversing the gains it had extended in the past three weeks.

In the week that ended on 14 February, the forex reserves declined by USD 2.54B to USD 635.721B.

The forex reserves had slumped for about four months, hitting an about 11-month low. Then came the latest rollercoaster movement.

The forex reserves started falling since they touched an all-time high of USD 704.89B in September. They are now about 10 per cent lower from its peak.

The decline in reserves is most likely due to RBI intervention, aimed at preventing a sharp depreciation of the Rupee. The Indian Rupee is now at or near its all-time low against the US dollar.

The latest RBI data showed that India's foreign currency assets (FCA), the largest component of forex reserves, stood at USD 539.591B.

Gold reserves currently amount to USD 74.150B, according to RBI data.

Estimates suggest that India's foreign exchange reserves are sufficient to cover approximately 10–11 months of projected imports.

In 2023, India added around USD 58B to its foreign exchange reserves, contrasting with a cumulative decline of USD 71B in 2022. *—ANI*

PHOTO:X

- The forex reserves had slumped for about four months, hitting an about 11-month low. Then came the latest roller-coaster movement

Analysts: Mkts to track global cues, FII this week

NEW DELHI, 23 FEB

Global trends, trading activity of foreign investors and news flow on tariffs are expected to influence movement in the equity market in a holiday-shortened week ahead, analysts said.

Equity markets would remain closed on Wednesday for 'Mahashivratri'.

"This week, we expect Nifty to remain in consolidation mode; tracking the mixed global market cues, US trade policy announcements and geopolitical developments with regards to the Russia-Ukraine war," Siddhartha Khemka, Head - Research, Wealth Management, Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd, said.

Movement of global oil benchmark Brent crude and the rupee-dollar trend would also dictate market trends this week.

Last week, the BSE benchmark declined 628.15 points, or 0.82 per cent, and the NSE Nifty went lower by 133.35 points, or 0.58 per cent.

"Reciprocal tariff concerns continued to dominate the global and the Indian equity markets," Shrikant Chouhan, Head-Equity Research, Kotak Securities, said.

Chouhan added that news flow on tariffs is expected to influence equity markets in the near term. *—PTI*

'Rise in feed cost to hit poultry'

NEW DELHI, 23 FEB

The Indian poultry industry's operating profitability is poised to slip during financial year 2025–26, owing to an increase in feed cost, even as strong demand leads to revenue growth of 8–10 per cent, Crisil Ratings said in a report.

The operating profitability is expected to slip 50 basis points, the rating agency said in a note this week.

With modest capital expenditure (capex), no significant debt addition and healthy accrual, the credit profiles of poultry companies are expected to remain stable, Crisil Ratings said.

The rating agency has come up with these estimates after analysing 30 poultry poultry companies it rates. Those 30 companies had generated revenue of about Rs 10,000 crore in fiscal 2023–24.

"The industry's margin improved last fiscal and this fiscal due to favourable input costs and higher realisation, particularly from softening feed prices," said the rating agency.

In 2025–26, profitability is, however, expected to narrow next fiscal owing to an anticipated increase in prices of maize and soya-made feeds.

Jayashree Nandakumar, Director, Crisil Ratings said the price of soya, which accounts for 30 per cent of the total feed cost, declined last fiscal. *—PTI*

Next India-Asean trade talks likely in April

NEW DELHI, 23 FEB

The next round of negotiations for reviewing the India–Asean free trade agreement in goods is expected in April, though the pace of talks is slow, an official said.

A free trade agreement in goods between India and the 10-nation bloc ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) was signed in 2009.

The ASEAN trade deal came into force in January 2010. In August 2023, both sides announced a complete review of the existing agreement in goods by 2025.

"The pace of talks is slow," the official said.

The review of the agreement is a long-standing demand of India, which wants an upgraded pact that addresses the current asymmetries in bilateral trade and will make trade more balanced and sustainable. India is asking for the review to eliminate barriers and misuse of the pact. *—PTI*

CASCADING EFFECT

Weather change may up farm loan defaults

NEW DELHI, 23 FEB

Rising temperature and growing threat of climate change may increase default risk in 30 per cent of agri and housing loans portfolio in the next five years, according to an analysis by BCG.

According to the report, the average global temperature has already increased approximately 1.2 degree Celsius versus pre-industrial levels leading to flooding in coastal areas and reduction in agriculture production.

As a result, it said, there has been a drop in per capita income of people impacted by rising extreme weather events.

Almost half of the credit of scheduled commercial banks is significantly dependent on nature and its ecosystem, any natural calamity impacts their bottom line.

PHOTO:FREEPIK

By 2030, 42 per cent India's districts are projected to experience temperature rise by up to 2 degree Celsius. So, 321 districts may be affected by temperature rise in the next five years.

However, climate change also provides an opportunity to banks to the tune of USD 150B annually to fund energy transition needs of the country as public funding is hugely inadequate to achieve the goal of net-zero by 2070.

"India is committing to sway away from coal and oil in favour of renewable energy. For India to make that difference/transition, an investment of USD 150–200 billion is required annually. On the contrary, the climate finance in India is somewhere between USD 40B and USD 60B, creating a gap of USD 100–150B," BCG MD Abhinav Bansal said.

"This transition will create a landscape of opportunity however we are very far from the target and we could see it happening by 2030-40 and so forth given that it begins right now," he said. *—PTI*

SEBI plans to expand angel fund investors

NEW DELHI, 23 FEB

Markets regulator SEBI is looking to expand the definition of qualified institutional buyers (QIB) and remove the 200-investor cap, allowing angel funds to access a broader pool of accredited investors.

This move will enable more wealthy investors to participate, boosting funding for startups. It ensures that only financially strong investors take on high-risk investments, helping Angel Funds raise more capital and support early-stage companies.

Angel Funds, a type of venture capital fund, mobilize money from investors to support startups.

However, concerns have been raised about inadequate verification of investors' risk appetite, the onboarding of numerous investors without strong financial backing, and potential conflicts with private placement regulations under the Companies Act, 2013.

To address these concerns, SEBI previously proposed that only Accredited Investors (AIs) should be allowed to invest in Angel Funds.

Additionally, SEBI has proposed removing the 200-investor cap for Angel Funds.

Under the Companies Act, private placements cannot be offered to more than 200 investors unless they are QIBs.

Currently, Angel Funds provide investment opportunities to a large number of investors, even though actual investments per company are limited to 200.

The Securities and Exchange Board of India has sought public comments on the proposals till 14 March. *—PTI*

Veer Ahlawat slips in third round of Kenya Open

NAIROBI, 23 FEB

Veer Ahlawat had a disastrous third round of 8-over 79 as he slipped to T-67 with one round to go in the Magical Kenya Open. The Indian rookie had a nightmarish 11 on the par-5 seventh besides four other bogeys against just two birdies for a 79. His earlier rounds were 70 and 72. Shubhankar Sharma had earlier missed the cut. South African Jacques Kruyswijk moved into pole position as he bids for his first DP World Tour title. He had a stunning seven-under-par round of 64 that gave him a one-stroke lead. The South African came home in five-under par at the Muthaiga Golf Club to lead England's John Parry by one. Parry added a one-over 72 to his opening two rounds of 63-65 as he goes in search of his second win of the 2025 Race to Dubai.—*PTI*

GM Iniyan loses to French IM Mahel in tiebreak

DUNKIRK, 23 FEB

Indian Grandmaster P. Iniyan finished runner-up in the 41st Cappelle La Grande International Open Tournament after losing to IM Mahel of France in the tie-breaks here. The fifth seed Indian scored 7.5 points, with six wins and 3 draws to be tied first alongside Mahel after nine rounds. However, luck was against Iniyan in tie-breaks as the French IM emerged victorious. After starting with four wins in a row, Iniyan drew the fifth game with fellow Indian IM Muthaiah. He then drew with the eventual third-place finisher GM Raja Rithvik of India. A win in the penultimate round left him leading the event along with Mahel.—*PTI*

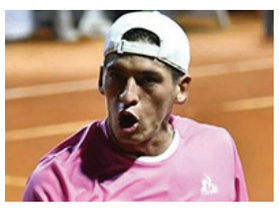


PHOTO: X

Baez defeats Carabelli, to defend title against Muller

PARIS, 23 FEB

Defending champion Sebastian Baez rallied from a set down to defeat fellow Argentine Camilo Ugo Carabelli 3-6, 6-1, 6-1 in the semifinals of the Rio Open on Saturday.The 24-year-old Baez, who is looking to become the first two-time Rio Open champion, will take on Alexandre Muller after the Frenchman beat Francisco Comesana 7-5, 6-7(3), 6-3 in a marathon battle.Despite an impressive opening set from lucky loser Carabelli, Baez found his pace to claim victory, winning 12 of the next 14 games and dropping just four service points in both the second and third sets."I'm so proud because the last weeks were a little tough for me," fifth seed Baez said. "I didn't feel very well this week, so I am happy to have recovered my body, my mind, my tennis."It's always difficult to play some guys you have known since we were kids. —*PTI*

Svrcina beats Holt in straight sets to clinch title

PUNE, 23 FEB

Unseeded Svrcina of the Czech Republic capped off a fine run by beating sixth seed Brandon Holt of USA 7-6(3), 6-1 in the final of the Pune Open ATP Challenger at the Balewadi Stadium on Sunday. It was the sixth singles title on the professional circuit for the 22-year-old Svrcina and the third in a row on Indian soil. Svrcina, who had made the semifinals in Chennai and the second round in Delhi in the last fortnight, won his last two titles in Bhubaneswar and Mumbai at USD 25,000 ITF events. The Czech, who had lost the third round of the qualifying event at the Australian Open this year, converted four of seven breakpoint chances in the final, as against two of six by his American opponent.—*PTI*

NZ aim for semifinal spot; B'desh fight for survival

Black Caps started dominantly, defeating hosts Pak by 60 runs

RAWALPINDI, 23 FEB

A confident New Zealand side will be eager to seal their semifinal spot when they take on Bangladesh, fighting for survival, in their Champions Trophy Group A match here on Monday.

The Black Caps started their campaign dominantly, defeating hosts Pakistan by 60 runs. This emphatic victory placed them at the top of Group A with a healthy net run rate of 1.200. A win on Monday will put them within touching distance of a semifinal berth.

suffered a six-wicket loss to India and currently sit third in the group with a net run rate of -0.408. They must secure a victory to stay in contention for the knockout stage.

New Zealand looked clinical in their opening match, and their recent triumph in the tri-series has further helped them adapt to the conditions in Pakistan.

However, they now face a selection dilemma with the potential return of Rachin Ravindra from a head injury. In his absence, Devon Conway and Will Young opened the innings. Initially, Young was expected to make way for Ravindra, but the right-hander's century against Pakistan has complicated the decision positively.

Bangladesh vs New Zealand will play the sixth match of ICC Champions Trophy 2025 in Rawalpindi *PHOTO: PTI*

NZ vs Bangladesh Match starts at 2.30 pm IST

Moreover, Young has consistently proven his ability to handle spin bowling effectively. Dropping him would also disrupt the left-hand-right-hand combination at the top, which could be crucial for New Zealand's batting strategy. Meanwhile, Conway appears to be regaining his best form. Apart from this selection call, New Zealand looks well-settled and is unlikely to make further changes to their playing XI.

Bangladesh, however, faces an uphill task and must regroup quickly after their disappointing defeat against neighboring India.

The pressure will be on their top order to deliver, as their batting struggles were evident in the previous match. If not for the 154-run sixth-wicket partnership between Jaker Ali and Towhid Hridoy, Bangladesh would have struggled to even reach 100. Despite winning a crucial toss, the Najmul Hossain Shanto-led side failed to capitalize on the advantage and got off to a poor start. —*PTI*

VIRAT KOHLI SCORES 14,000 RUNS IN ODI CRICKET

DUBAI, 23 FEB

India superstar Virat Kohli on Sunday created history as he became the quickest batter to score 14,000 runs in One-Day Internationals, surpassing the legendary Sachin Tendulkar's previous record, during the Champions Trophy clash against Pakistan here.

Kohli is now only the third batter in ODI cricket to have scored 14,000 runs, after the legendary Indian Sachin Tendulkar (18,246 runs) and Sri Lanka's Kumar Sangakkara (14,234 runs).

Kohli is the quickest ever to the milestone, having completed his 14,000 ODI runs in 287 innings. Before him, Tendulkar had taken 350 innings to reach the feat while Sangakkara took 378 outings. Coincidentally, both Kohli and Tendulkar scored their 14,000th ODI run against Pakistan. —*PTI*

Jasprit Bumrah received his ICC awards for 2024 in Dubai on Sunday *PHOTO: X/@ICC*

Bumrah receives his ICC awards for 2024

DUBAI, 23 FEB

India pacer Jasprit Bumrah on Sunday received his ICC honors, including the Men's Cricketer of the Year and Men's Test Cricketer of the Year awards, before the start of the Champions Trophy match between India and Pakistan here.

Bumrah is not playing in the Champions Trophy as he has been sidelined with a back issue.

The 31-year-old was present here to collect the awards, which also include a place in the Men's Test and T20I Teams for 2024. The ICC posted photographs of Bumrah with each of his four awards including two caps and wrote on X, "Jasprit Bumrah receives his #ICCAwards and Team Of The Year caps for a stellar 2024." Bumrah had also met his India teammates on Sunday during their warm-up drills before the match against Pakistan.

Bumrah had an outstanding Test season last year, taking 71 wickets in 13 matches with the second-best effort coming from England's Gus Atkinson who claimed 52 wickets in 11 matches. Bumrah averaged 14.92 in Tests in 2024 and ended the year with a strike rate of 30.1.

He also became only the fourth Indian bowler to take 70 or more wickets in the conventional format in a calendar year after Kapil Dev, Anil Kumble, and R. Ashwin. —*PTI*

> My fans following his match-winning contributions during the ICC T20 World Cup title victory in the Caribbean last year
>
> -Hardik Pandya
> India all-rounder

WOMEN'S PREMIER LEAGUE

Mandhana, home-crowd support could make things difficult for UP

BENGALURU, 23 FEB

Royal Challengers Bengaluru's sturdy middle-order, in-form skipper Smriti Mandhana, and a partisan home crowd will be the major challenges UP Warriorz will have to face when the two teams clash in their Women's Premier League match here on Monday. India vice-captain Mandhana has been in red-hot form, smashing five half-centuries and a ton in the last 10 matches she has played for the country and her franchise. But the top-order batter would not like to take around anytime in the contest.

RCB vs UP Warriorz Match starts at 7.30 pm IST

However, after having made a confident start with back-to-back victories, and chasing down a 200-plus score against Gujarat Giants with plenty of deliveries to spare, Mandhana would have oodles of confidence in her side going into the contest. Though RCB suffered a setback in their previous outing against Harmanpreet Kaur's side Mumbai Indians, it was more on account of the Bengaluru team's middle-order having an off day, though Elyse Perry stood rock-solid with a fine 81. —*PTI*

Mirra wins title in Dubai

DUBAI, 22 FEB

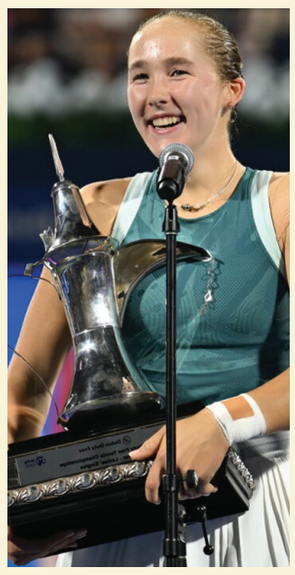
Russian teenager Mirra Andreeva beat Clara Tauson 7-6 (1), 6-1 in the Dubai Championships on Saturday to earn the biggest title of her career.

The victory will earn Andreeva her debut in the top 10 of the rankings next week the first 17-year-old to achieve that since Nicole Vaidisova in 2007.

It caps quite a week for Andreeva, who also had wins over 2023 Wimbledon champion Marketa Vondrousova, five-time major champion Iga Swiatek, and 2022 Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina to become the youngest player to defeat three major champions at a single event since Maria Sharapova at the 2004 WTA Finals.

She also became the youngest player to reach the final of a WTA 1000 event.

Andreeva's only other title was the Iasi Open in Romania last year. "Now when you enter Top 10 and the higher your ranking is, the slower and longer it's going to take for you to be even higher because the difference in the points is very, very short, very small," Andreeva said. —*PTI*



Chappell calls on his long journalistic career

NEW DELHI, 23 FEB

Legendary cricketer Ian Chappell's insightful writings, critical reviews, and anecdotes from his playing days will be missed after the Australian icon called curtains on his more than five-decade-long journalistic career, penning his last piece on Sunday.

The 81-year-old fondly recalled some of the best moments he has written about, including the legendary battle between Sachin Tendulkar and the late spin wizard Shane Warne in the 1998 Chennai Test, as well as VVS Laxman's iconic 281 against Australia in Kolkata, in his last column for 'ESPNcricinfo'.

"There have been many pleasures from writing, notably Sachin Tendulkar combating Shane Warne in Chennai. Other highlights included writing about the genius of Brian Lara, Ricky Ponting's aggression, and VVS Laxman's classic 281 in Kolkata," Chappell wrote. However, he felt the time was right for him to "put down the pen and pack away the computer", adding that retirement from journalism was as emotional as stepping away from cricket.

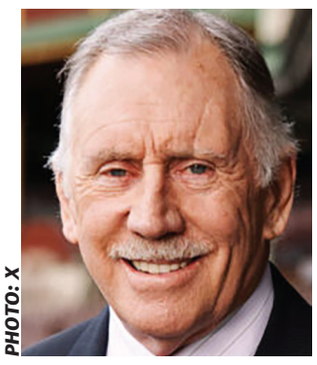


PHOTO: X

"I've been writing for more than 50 years, but the time has come and this will be my last column. Retirement from journalism is similar to cricket - I knew the time was right," said the former top-order batter, who played 75 Tests, scoring 5,345 runs. —*PTI*

Newcastle United beats Nottingham Forest 4-3 in EFL Cup thriller

LONDON, 23 FEB

Newcastle United scored four goals in 11 first-half minutes to keep alive their Champions League qualification hopes with a thrilling 4-3 victory over Nottingham Forest at St James' Park on Sunday but had to hold on under heavy pressure in the second period.

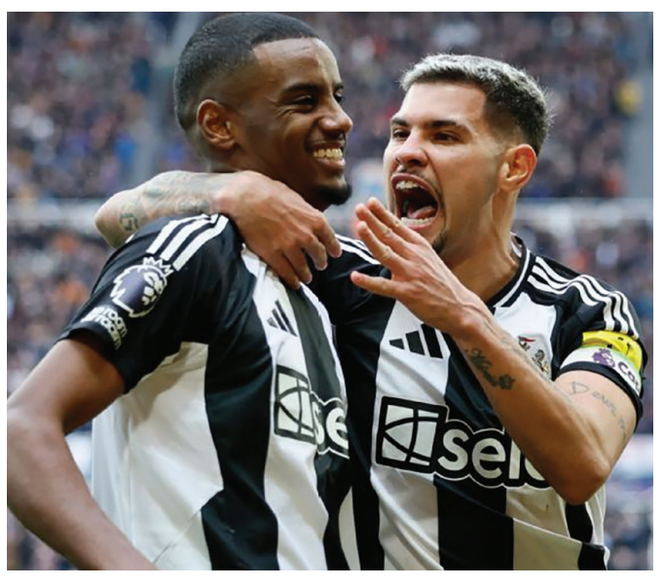
Newcastle moved into fifth place with 44 points from 26 games, outside of the top four on goal difference only.

High-flying Forest lost for the second week in a row but remains in third with 47 points from the same number of matches.

Forest led early through Callum Hudson-Odoi's long-range strike but Newcastle roared into life with four quick goals from 18-year-old Lewis Miley, Jacob Murphy, and a brace from Alexander Isak, the first a penalty, which gave them a 4-1 half-time lead.

Forest was the better side in the second period and created numerous chances against a nervous home team, as Nikola Milenkovic netted and a late goal by Ryan Yates almost earned the visitors what would have been a deserved point.

Forest, who started the day in third place, took an early lead through Callum Hudson-Odoi but were then blown away by the Magpies, who breathed new life into their own Champions League challenge after coming out on top by the odd goal in seven.—*PTI*



Alexander Isak's impressive scoring season continued against Nottingham Forest *PHOTO: X / @NUFC*

Angel Yin wins LPGA Thailand tournament

PATTAYA, 23 FEB

Angel Yin shot a blemish-free final round to win the LPGA Thailand tournament by a stroke from a fast-finishing Akie Iwai of Japan and claim her second tour title on Sunday. The 26-year-old American made seven birdies and no bogeys for a four-round total of 28-under 260 at Siam Country Club's Pattaya Old Course, which was enough to hold off Iwai despite her 61 being the lowest score of the day.

It is the California native's second LPGA title after winning the Buick LPGA Shanghai in 2023. She is a two-time major runner-up — at the 2023 Chevron Championship and the 2019 U.S. Women's Open. —*PTI*

MLS OPENER

Messi and Inter Miami held by New York City

LONDON, 23 JAN

Lionel Messi and Inter Miami stumbled out of the blocks with a 2-2 home draw against New York City FC in the opening round of the new Major League Soccer season on Saturday.

Miami, who broke the regular season points record last year before crashing out in the first round of the playoffs, played the bulk of the match with 10 men after Argentine defender Tomas Aviles was sent off. Messi provided the assists for both Miami's goals including the leveler which came in the 10th minute of stoppage time. With new head coach Javier Mascherano in charge for the first time in MLS, having replaced fellow Argentine Gerardo Martino, Miami featured several new faces but looked disjointed for most of the encounter.

Inter Miami's Lionel Messi against New York City FC in Major League Soccer *PHOTO: X / @LEOMESSI*

The night began perfectly for Miami who took the lead in the fifth minute, Messi slipping a pass to Aviles who slotted home. —*PTI*

Guirassy scores 4 for Dortmund

Serhou Guirassy became the first player since Erling Haaland to score four goals for Borussia Dortmund in a 6-0 rout of Union Berlin on Saturday in the Bundesliga. "Four goals, victory, amazing fans," Guirassy told broadcaster Sky after the game. "The first time in my life, I think. Four goals is such a great thing.

Haraldsson scores twice as Lille moves to 3rd place

PARIS, 23 FEB

Haraldsson scored his first brace in the French league as Lille beat Monaco 2-1 Saturday and leapfrogged its rival to move into third place in the standings.

Lille has 41 points, one more than Riviera rivals Nice and Monaco. Fourth-place Nice has one match in hand and takes on struggling Montpellier on Sunday.

Lille dominated early proceedings at the Pierre Mauroy stadium and was rewarded in the 22nd minute when Haraldsson broke the deadlock after a slick move. The Iceland midfielder was set up by Ngal'ayel Mukau rushed toward the goal unchallenged and scored with a precise shot from the edge of the area into the far corner.

Monaco reacted well and had a good chance to level near the half-hour mark when Eliesse Ben Seghir's attempt with the outside of the foot ended inches wide from Vanderson's low cross. But Monaco continued its trend this season of making silly mistakes as a sloppy pass from Wilfred Singo to Denis Zakaria led to Lille's second goal. —*PTI*